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Abstract

Religion and Contested Cultural Heritage: The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as Church, Mosque, and Museum

Stéphanie Machabée

2022

This project uses the fourth-century Rotunda in Thessaloniki, Greece and the sixth-century Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey as case study sites for exploring conflicts over religious heritage. These two sites have a shared history of repurposing, from pre-Christian sites, to churches, to mosques, to museums, and to hybrid religious/heritage spaces today. These transformations are the outcome of shifting political powers and changing religious priorities over the centuries. As a result of these complex histories, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are notable examples of “dissonant heritage” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). That is, they are loci of competing narratives and public representations of the past, and thus they are also sites of contestation between different religious, political, and (inter)national groups today.

Through its examination of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, this project explores three interrelated topics. First, it examines the architectural changes religious sites undergo when they are repurposed for a different religious use, and when they are made into monuments and museums—that is, when they are officially recognized as “heritage.” Second, it identifies how stakeholders negotiate the spatial and conceptual boundaries of religious practices at heritage sites today. Third, it investigates the ways in which the preservation and management of religious heritage presents unique challenges for the heritage industry.

Through these three lines of inquiry, this project teases out what is at stake in the (re)conversion and secularization of religious sites for stakeholders, and why these transitions so often lead to conflict. It presents a historical account of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, using ancient and modern first-hand accounts, archaeological reports, urban plans, correspondences, and online media posts to craft a narrative of continuity and discontinuity and of preservation and destruction, focusing on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in particular. In uncovering key moments of transition in these palimpsestic, layered histories of the sites, it seeks to contextualize recent conflicts over their ownership and interpretation. It explores how controlling the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia has often meant controlling the societal identity of Thessaloniki and Istanbul more broadly.

Though the secularization of religious historic sites is still understood by some stakeholders as an answer to contested heritage, this project demonstrates the ways in which this strategy can fail. It interrogates how the preservation and management of religious sites should account for the different needs embodied in the “religious” and “heritage” uses of historic places, arguing that there needs to be a better sensitivity to the dynamics of and tensions that result from religious and nonreligious engagements, modes, and moods within the same site. Ultimately, this project reveals how heritage sites can become loci for religious revival and for negotiating the role of religion in the modern world. Religious heritage sites, it concludes, ought to be understood as living places, which means giving space to religion and religious practices.

**Religion and Contested Cultural Heritage:
The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as Church, Mosque, and Museum**

A Dissertation
Presented to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of
Yale University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Stéphanie Machabée

Dissertation Director: Stephen J. Davis

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Introduction

On 24 July 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands gathered both inside and outside Hagia Sophia, a nearly 1,500-year-old building in the historic heart of Istanbul, Turkey's most populous city. Those who gathered, primarily Muslims from Istanbul but also Muslim Turks from across the country, performed their Friday prayers. Only two weeks prior, on 10 July, it had been publicly announced that Hagia Sophia would no longer operate as a museum, a role it had served for eighty-six years. The site would once again function as a working religious space.¹ To some, it was a positive, symbolic event. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2014–) presented it as a moment in which Hagia Sophia's bondage chains were broken, and many cheered with joy: "We have been waiting for years to pray here," one female visitor remarked.²

To others, however, the abrupt shift in Hagia Sophia's status was a step backwards for the nation. "The decision of the Turkish leadership to turn #HagiaSophia into a mosque is a profoundly provocative act against the international community. It brutally insults historical memory, undermines the value of tolerance, and poisons Turkey's relations with the entire civilized world," stated Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou (2020–) on Twitter.³ Turkish novelist and Nobel-prize winner Orhan

¹ This statement is not to suggest that no religious activity occurred at Hagia Sophia in its role as a museum. Later chapters will provide instances of religious activity at Hagia Sophia before its reconversion into a mosque in 2020.

² "Hagia Sophia: Why is this Museum-Turned-Mosque at the Centre of a Culture War?," *BBC News*, 24 July 2020. [Online](#).

³ Katerina Sakellariopoulou, @PresidencyGR, *Twitter*, 10 July 2020. [Online](#).

Pamuk reacted similarly to the announcement, claiming that Turks were proud to be a secular Muslim nation and that Hagia Sophia's conversion would take away this pride.⁴

A few decades earlier, and a few hundred miles to the west of Istanbul, in the northernly-situated and second-most populous city of Greece, Thessaloniki, a similar controversy over use and status of an ancient site had unfolded. The clash between “church and state” at the Rotunda, a fourth-century building, reached its height in the 1990s. Some residents of Thessaloniki claimed that the Orthodox Church should be the proper custodian of the Rotunda, whereas others—who viewed the building as foremost a secularized historic site, to be accessed as a monument and museum—argued that the site's ownership and stewardship should remain with the Ministry of Culture.

In September 1995, one senior church official and his supporters took it upon themselves to build a Holy Table, or altar,⁵ inside the building during an all-night vigil. This vigil was not unusual; the Rotunda was occasionally used as a space for Christian services, with the permission of the Ministry of Culture. What was not permitted, however, was the addition of any unauthorized, permanent fixtures to the site, such as this Holy Table. As a consecrated object, it would have been viewed as re-sanctifying the Rotunda as a church, and thus through this act, the Bishopric of Thessaloniki (the local Orthodox Church) may have hoped to establish its claim to the site, seizing it from the archaeological body responsible for it. Ultimately, this conflict over the Rotunda's

⁴ Orla Guerin, “Hagia Sophia: Turkey Turns Iconic Istanbul Museum into Mosque,” *BBC News*, 10 July 2020. [Online](#).

⁵ Note that there are differences in terminology between Orthodox/Eastern and Catholic/Western Christian traditions. This project will generally apply the terminology of the former. As for the spelling of Greek proper names, it will largely adopt the conventional English spelling (Cassander instead of Kassander or Nicetas instead of Niketas).

ownership—and over its identity—went all the way to the high courts of Greece. Unlike the case of Hagia Sophia, where Turkey’s 10th Chamber of the Council of State annulled the 1934 decree that had made the site into a museum, the Supreme Court of Greece confirmed the Rotunda’s function as a monument and its stewardship under the Ministry of Culture. The building, however, could be used up to twelve times a year for Christian services.

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are sites that have undergone multiple conversions, with their meanings challenged, negotiated, and rewritten at numerous points in their long, complex histories (Figures 1–4). Both have a connection to Roman religious space: the Rotunda was originally built as a Roman temple and Hagia Sophia may have been built over one. These sites both functioned as churches for centuries, until they were later converted into mosques under the Ottoman Empire, first Hagia Sophia in 1453, and then the Rotunda in 1590. The two sites were transformed into monuments and museums in the early twentieth century, not long after Thessaloniki and Istanbul were made part of nation-states. As a result of this multilayered history, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia have been important loci of conflict over heritage. Notably in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, clashes have emerged between religious communities claiming access to and ownership of the sites and others—such as proponents of secular society—who vehemently oppose the religious use of these ancient buildings.

As this project will demonstrate, these debates over ownership, status, and use of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are in part a negotiation of what boundaries religion has or should (not) have at museums and heritage sites today. As stakeholders define, redefine, or challenge these boundaries, several questions become central to these conflicts: To



Figure 1: Exterior of the Rotunda (2018).⁶

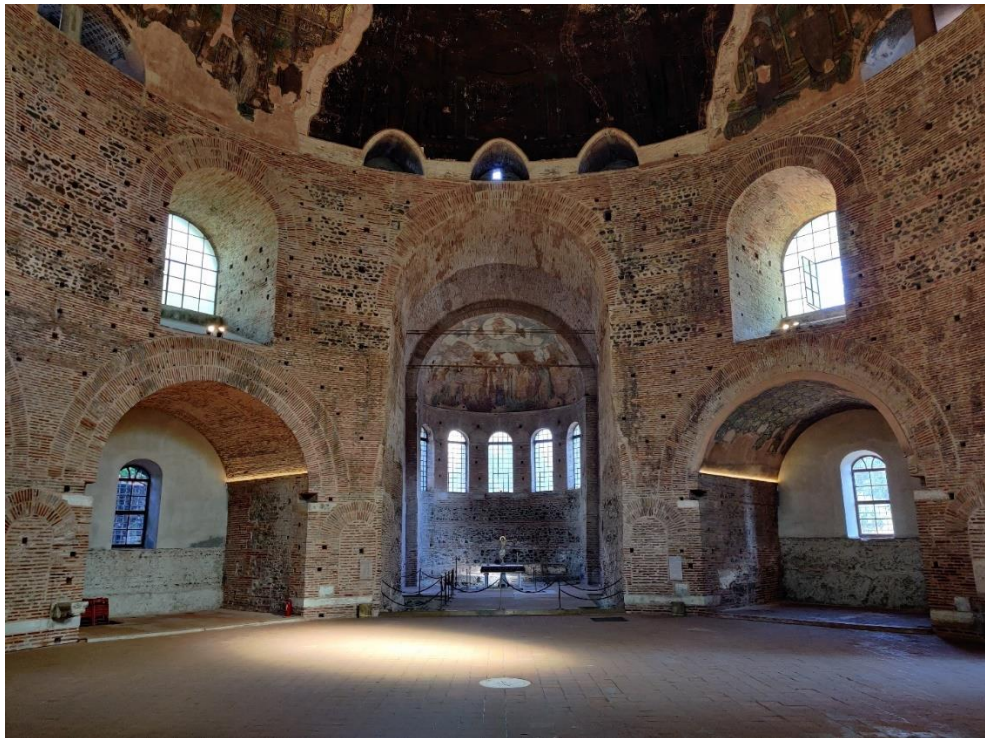


Figure 2: Interior of the Rotunda (2021).

⁶ All photographs are my own, unless otherwise indicated.



Figure 3: Exterior of Hagia Sophia (2021).

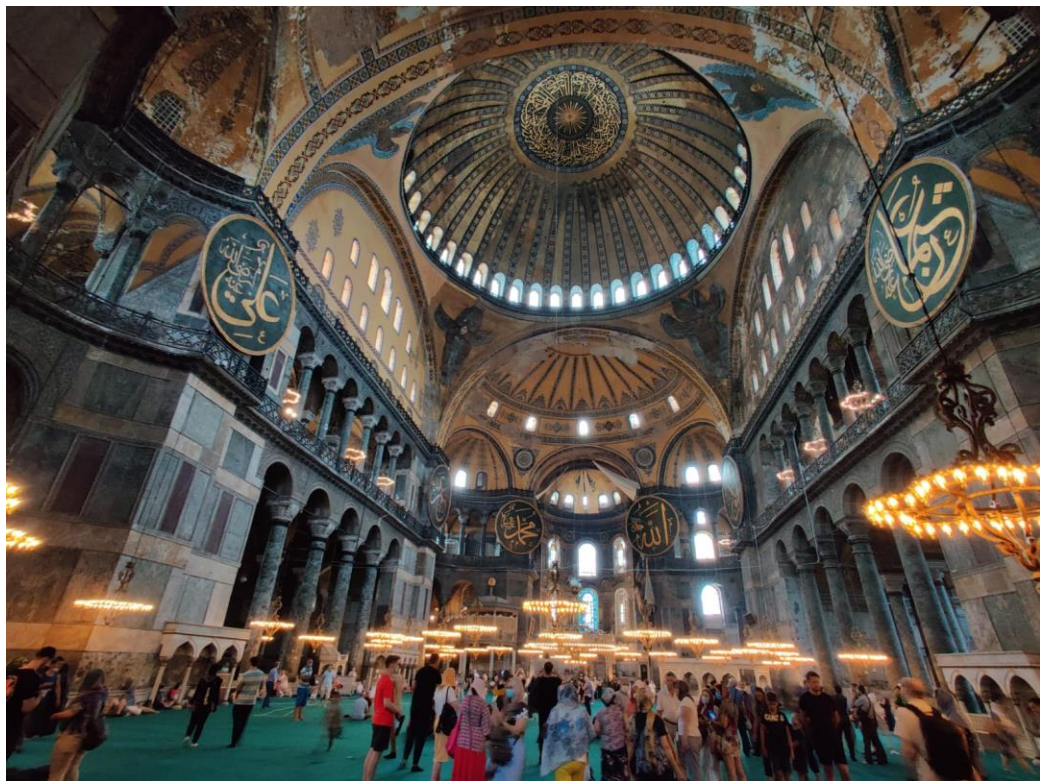


Figure 4: Interior of Hagia Sophia (2021).

whom do these sites belong?⁷ Who can have access to them? What kind of access and use is permitted? And what *are* these sites? Are they churches, mosques, monuments, or museums? Are they all of these, or some of these? This project, through a historical-contextual analysis of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, addresses these questions in order to better understand the core of these conflicts. It is thus motivated by questions that arise when religion and heritage intersect.

I use the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as case study sites for exploring three interrelated topics. First, I seek to understand what changes religious sites undergo when they are repurposed for a different religious use, and when they are made into monuments and museums—that is, when they are officially recognized as national “heritage.” Part I of this project (Chapters 1–3) takes a step back from recent developments at these two sites in order to focus on the changes—architecturally, ritualistically, conceptually—that the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia underwent when their function and their identity were religiously repurposed at various points in their layered histories. My analysis will demonstrate the ways in which architectural spaces and meaningful places can be continually remade. Additionally, it will also provide the necessary context for understanding the conflicts over the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia today, by identifying the religious forms of engagement that were lost, changed, and recovered when the two were made into monuments and museums at the beginning of the twentieth century. I further

⁷ Stakeholders vary greatly. They could be individuals who use and access the site as part of their regular routine or individuals who have only visited the site once but feel a deep, personal attachment to it. They could be historians who have spent their life studying the site or they could be politicians who understand the political capital they can gain through some kind of (symbolic, financial, etc.) investment in the site. They could also be heritage professionals who wish to do everything in their power to prevent the site from decaying or changing. What stakeholders hold in common is an opinion—or a *stake*—in how the site ought to be presented, valued, or managed. Stakeholders both affect and are affected by the heritage site.

argue that this newfound “secular” status reframed the religious significance of these sites as *sacred secular* heritage, through the strong sacralizing powers of heritage-making discourse.

Second, in Part II of this project, I seek to identify the boundaries that contemporary stakeholders carve out for religious engagements with heritage sites. Though the secularization of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia at the beginning of the twentieth century circumscribed religious activity at these sites, the occasional use of the Rotunda as a church today and Hagia Sophia’s recent reconversion into a mosque have demonstrated how heritage sites can be loci for religious revival. Chapter 4 investigates clashes in the past quarter century between religious communities, proponents of the secular use of these sites, and the state; and it identifies the motivations, events, and charismatic figures that played a significant role in to the more recent religious use of these sites. Chapter 5 examines what site transformations occurred to generate religious places and to service religious communities. Part II also demonstrates the ways in which religion and heritage are inherently entangled with the political, and as such, are especially ripe for conflict.

Third, I investigate whether the preservation and management of religious heritage presents unique challenges for the heritage industry. Part III moves beyond the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia and suggests that a carefully negotiated balance of religious and secular uses and access of heritage places has the potential to address conflict over religious sites. Chapter 6 presents a more hybrid way of conceptualizing the relationship between religious and secular uses of heritage places, examining this interplay at the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain and Stonehenge in England, as well as at the

Rotunda and Hagia Sophia. Chapter 7 uses the Red and White Monasteries near Sohag, Egypt as a case study for examining issues of visitor sustainability at religious heritage sites. I ask, for instance, whether religious use is inherently more consuming, given it oftentimes involves interacting with religious artifacts in ways that are typically circumscribed in museum settings. Taken together, these two chapters reveal the (in)compatibility of religious and secular uses of heritage sites. Part III aims to reimagine future possibilities for religious heritage sites.

This project is interdisciplinary by nature and by necessity. Modern conceptualizations of heritage have been informed by scholarship in archaeology, architecture, art history, anthropology, geography, history, urbanism, among many other disciplines. Scholars of religion have traditionally not been as active in heritage studies, though this is now starting to change—a necessary shift, I argue, and one this project contributes to. I examine the distinctiveness of *religious* heritage and the unique challenges presented in its protection. As a scholar trained in religious studies, I have the tools to tease out what is at stake in the (re-)conversion and secularization of religious sites for communities of users, and why these transitions so often lead to conflict. To accomplish this work, this project focuses on two case studies and contextualizes current controversies over these sites by looking at the past. It presents a historical account of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, using ancient and modern first-hand accounts, archaeological reports, urban plans, correspondences, and online media posts to craft a narrative of continuity and discontinuity and of preservation and destruction. I interweave into this narrative my observations from site visits in 2018, 2019 and 2021, when the Rotunda was used as a monument, and on one occasion a church, and where I experienced Hagia

Sophia as a museum and later on as a mosque. In conversation with scholarship from religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines, I seek to understand the actual and conceivable role for religion—its rituals, its traditions, its practices—at heritage sites today. Ultimately, this project reveals the potential of religious studies scholarship to contribute to heritage literature, and vice versa.

In the rest of this introduction, I first identify the shared cultural, historical, political, and religious relations between my two case study sites and their respective cities. Placing the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia in conversation with one another will be particularly productive for contextualizing how historical events—the past—informs disputes in the present, and for understanding how such controversies are always relational, where one group’s demands are informed by or in reaction to another’s. I then interrogate the term “heritage.” Though I have been deploying heritage as if it were a fixed concept, I demonstrate that this very fixity is the intentional result of heritage-making discourse. The malleability of heritage, and the impossibility of a stable identification, can result in contestation or conflict over historic sites—what G.J. Ashworth and John Tunbridge have called “dissonant heritage.” I also explore the terms “religious” and “sacred,” as their use and negotiation will be core to issues over the management and preservation of heritage.

Why the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia? Why Thessaloniki and Istanbul?

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are useful case study sites for addressing the aforementioned set of concerns. Moreover, analyzing these two sites together is generative given their shared histories but different statuses today. They are among some

of the world's oldest surviving Christian churches and they share a similar complex history of repurposing. As part of larger imperial complexes, the two sites played an important role in the Byzantine history of Thessaloniki and Istanbul, where their conversion into mosques under the Ottoman Empire signaled an important political shift in these cities. In the early twentieth century, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia were declared monuments and made into museums. Today, both hold the status of UNESCO World Heritage sites⁸—though Hagia Sophia's status is currently in danger, given its recent reconversion into a mosque⁹—and their recognized “universal value” insinuates that all of humanity shares some kind of vested interest in seeing these sites preserved for posterity.¹⁰

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia also share a geographical connection, joined by the Aegean Sea and by the ancient Roman Via Egnatia.¹¹ The Rotunda is located in Thessaloniki, a city with a population of approximately one million inhabitants in its metropolitan area. The capital of modern-day Greek Macedonia,¹² Thessaloniki is

⁸ The sites themselves are not UNESCO World Heritage sites. Rather, they are one among a constellation of sites in Thessaloniki and Istanbul that have been listed for their significant historical and culture value. UNESCO refers to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

⁹ “UNESCO Statement on Hagia Sophia, Istanbul,” *UNESCO*, 10 July 2020. [Online](#).

¹⁰ According to its mission statement, UNESCO “seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity.” It does so by encouraging “international cooperation in the conservation of our world’s cultural and natural heritage.” In “World Heritage,” *UNESCO*, n.d. [Online](#).

¹¹ This nearly 700-mile-long road, constructed by the Romans in the second century BCE, connected travelers east-west between Europe and Asia Minor, between Dyrrachium (modern-day Durrës in Albania) and Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul). From Dyrrachium, travelers could travel by sea to Brindisi, in southeast Italy, and continue on the Via Appia, which connected them to Rome.

¹² Macedonia is a geographic and administrative region of Greece. I refer to “Greek Macedonia” here in order to avoid confusion with North Macedonia, a country to the north of Greece, previously known as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Greece has taken issue with the name “Macedonia,” accusing the young country of appropriating figures and symbols typically considered a part of Greek culture (as seen in the statues of Philip and Alexander erected in many North Macedonian cities). For nearly two decades, the

situated in the north of the country. Though Thessaloniki and Athens are the two most populous cities of Greece, they are also quite different, both culturally and historically, in part because Thessaloniki remained under the Ottoman Empire for nearly a century longer than Athens. Due to its geographical location, Thessaloniki has historically served as an economic and cultural crossroad between the west of Europe and the northern Balkans, and between the Greek-speaking world and the Eastern Mediterranean. Unlike other cities whose economic and cultural influence, or physical size, waned over time (such as Nineveh and Babylon in modern-day Iraq, Thebes and Memphis in Egypt, or Mohenjo-daro in modern-day Pakistan), Thessaloniki has continuously functioned as an urban center ever since its establishment in the fourth century BCE.¹³ This continuity may explain in part why vestiges of the ancient city sometimes overlap with the modern, where the past and present comeingle in Thessaloniki's urban landscape (Figure 5). The city, over the centuries, was the center of Greek and Roman cults and later of Christianity. When it was made a part of the Ottoman Empire, Thessaloniki became a very multicultural city, with a majority Jewish population, and significant Muslim and Christian ones. Once the city was annexed to Greece in the twentieth century, it quickly regained its former Christian character.

northern country's name was a matter of ongoing debate in bilateral and international relations. Today, this issue seems mostly resolved, after both countries agreed to the name "Republic of North Macedonia" in June 2018 and North Macedonia renamed some of its buildings (for instance, Skopje Alexander the Great Airport was changed to Skopje International Airport). This dispute demonstrates the power of naming, as well as highlights how ownership of the past (its characters, events, and locations) is negotiable and most certainly political. For more information about this conflict, see: Alexis Heraclides, *The Macedonian Question and the Macedonians* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2020).

¹³ Ioannis K. Hassiotis, *Queen of the Worthy: Thessaloniki, History and Culture* (Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, 1997), 13.



Figure 5: Thessaloniki's ancient Roman forum is surrounded by modern apartment complexes (2021).



Figure 6: The ancient and modern city overlap in Istanbul's urban landscape.
Source: WorldArchitecture.com.

A few hundred miles east is Hagia Sophia, located in Istanbul, a city with approximately fifteen million inhabitants in its metropolitan area. Sitting in northwestern Turkey, and spanning both sides of the Bosphorus strait, the city is often described as straddling both the European and Asian continents, sitting at the crossroads between west and east.¹⁴ Istanbul has fulfilled the role of capital city for three different empires: Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman—but not for the Republic of Turkey.¹⁵ The city has therefore served as an important political metropolis.¹⁶ It has had a remarkable history, and much like Thessaloniki, the ancient and modern city often overlap in the urban landscape, in both organic and purposeful ways (Figure 6). Furthermore, Istanbul also has been the center of changing religious leadership and populations, and prior to its incorporation into the newly-established Republic of Turkey, it was a multicultural city with a majority Muslim population, and significant Christian and Jewish ones as well.

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are thus located in cities that have parallel political and religious histories. The two cities also gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in close proximity to one another, in the early twentieth century. This new status generated extensive urban renewal, informed in part by a desire to de-Ottomanize and to Europeanize sections of the cities. Most significantly, these developments at times hinged on the secularization of important religious sites, which

¹⁴ According to Jonathan Harris, the city is at the narrowest crossing point between the two continents, separated by a mere 500 meters by the Bosphorus. In *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*, 2nd Ed. (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017 [2007]), 2.

¹⁵ Turkey's capital is Ankara, a city over 200 miles east from Istanbul and thus further away from the European continent. Chapter 2 provides more context for this change in capital.

¹⁶ See, for instance: Bettany Hughes, *Istanbul: A Tale of Three Cities* (Boston, Mass.: De Capo Press, 2017).

directly impacted how the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia would be conceived and used throughout the twentieth century. The two cities are also famed for their past multicultural lives, which contributed to the economic, religious, and cultural richness of Thessaloniki and Istanbul. This multiculturalism is in striking contrast with their current status as more monocultural cities. It has also contributed, I argue, to conflicts and tensions over interpretations of and access to the cities' heritage sites and artifacts.

Furthermore, I intentionally selected a Greek and a Turkish case study because of the complicated, tense relationship between these two nations, today and historically. Military and political conflict has long strained Greek-Turkish relations, in large part due to centuries-long Ottoman control of now-Greek territory and the 1974 Turkish invasion of the majority ethnically Greek Cyprus. This tension between the nations will become especially clear in the case of Hagia Sophia, where its recent conversion into a mosque was highly criticized by Greek officials, who saw the event as an affront to the Greek nation. Furthermore, Thessaloniki and Istanbul's shared experience under the Ottoman Empire continues to inform how both these cities remember and celebrate their past in the present time. Ancient sites like the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia get caught up in these memory-making practices, at times becoming important loci for grappling with this contested heritage. This project is therefore an investigation of the Rotunda, Hagia Sophia, and their stakeholders, as they are intertwined within the larger narratives of Thessaloniki and Istanbul.

As a result of this rich history, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are important examples of "dissonant heritage." In other words, as I describe in more detail in the next section, they are loci of inharmonious narratives and public representations of the past

and therefore are also sites of contestation between different religious, political, and (inter)national groups today. Since the 1990s in particular, there have been clashes between different religious groups, as well as between state and religious leaders, at both the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia. The past—whose past and what past—is constantly renegotiated through these two historic sites. Central to this dissonance are questions of these sites' significance, their use as religious *and/or* heritage places, and, in the case of Hagia Sophia, *what kind* of religious place it is (church or mosque). As this project will demonstrate, the stakeholders who participate in these conversations are in fact negotiating what boundaries religious practices have or should (not) have at heritage sites today.

Making (Dissonant) Heritage

What does it mean to understand or identify something as heritage? In what follows, I make two arguments. First, heritage is not a stable category. What is considered heritage in one context may not be considered heritage in another. Second, and closely related to the first point, I argue heritage is best viewed *not* as an object or thing but as a discourse or process. It is more helpful to frame heritage as *heritage-making discourse*. That is, a case must be made why something is deemed heritage. It must be argued for and is therefore not self-evident—though it may appear to be so, because of heritage-making discourse's persuasive powers. By understanding heritage as discourse, we can better understand why a religious heritage site can have such a wide variety of significances and interpretations, thus easily lending itself to dissonance.

The etymology of heritage and dictionary definitions of the term suggest a rather static concept. The root “her-” in *heritage* derives from the Latin *hērēs* (meaning “to leave behind” or “abandon”), a cognate of the Greek *khēra* (χήρα, “widow”). An heir is someone who comes into possession of (or *inherits*) something. The term heritage therefore has the connotation of both abandonment and possession, something that is left behind to be owned by someone else.¹⁷ Today, the term can be used in a wide variety of contexts, including family heritage (for example, an inherited sense of identity that derives from one’s family tree, the heritage that lives in someone’s DNA) or animal or plant heritage (for instance, an older, traditional breed, such as heirloom tomatoes). In this project, I restrict my analysis of heritage to its cultural use rather than its biological meaning.

From a legal perspective, heritage-as-a-noun can refer to “something that has been or may be inherited by legal descent or succession” or “any property, especially land, that devolves by right of inheritance.”¹⁸ In such definitions, heritage is something that is tangible, owned, and has the ability to be given or passed on. Indeed, even outside of legal contexts, heritage is something that can be passed down.¹⁹ Meanwhile, heritage-as-

¹⁷ There are important semantic differences that have led to different cultural attitudes towards heritage. Veronica della Dora explains: “Rooted in the Germanic ‘heir’, the English word ‘heritage’ places emphasis on the successor who receives. The past is treated as ‘an active agent in the present’, thus allowing freedom to transform.” By contrast, Dora explains, “heritage’s equivalents in the romance languages (It. *‘patrimonio’*, Fr. *‘patrimoine’*, etc.) emphasize the giver’s intentions rather than the recipient’s acts, rendering the relationship one of duty and therefore suggesting a limited flexibility in dealing with the past.” The management of this project’s two case studies have been informed by both sets of attitudes, in large depending on the agendas of politicians. In “Infrasecular Geographies: Making, Unmaking and Remaking Sacred Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42:1 (2018): 62. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁸ “Heritage,” *WordReference.com*, n.d. [Online](#).

¹⁹ Dictionary.com defines heritage as “handed down from the past, as a tradition.” In “Heritage,” *Dictionary.com*, n.d. [Online](#).

an-adjective can mean “relating to things of historic or cultural value that are worthy of preservation.”²⁰ Heritage is a quality that suggests value, a need for proper care, and a connection to the past. Heritage-as-an-adjective can also mean “noting or relating to a product, place, etc., that evokes a nostalgic sense of tradition or history.”²¹ That is, heritage can induce a particular emotional reaction, one grounded in feelings of longing for the past.

These definitions, though a good starting point, are not entirely sufficient for understanding the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as heritage. That is, what many of these definitions fail to highlight is the *dynamic* aspect of heritage. The quality of heritage is not inherent to sites, to traditions, or to landscapes. Age or history does not automatically confer heritage status. Rather, heritage, is constructed, challenged, and reconstructed, through discourse.²² I therefore suggest we approach heritage not solely as a noun or adjective, but *heritage-as-a-verb*. Historic sites, objects, and other cultural resources are made *into* heritage through official and unofficial channels, relying on memory-making

²⁰ Quoted in Manas Kumar Das, *Indian Cultural Heritage* (Solapur, India: Laxmi Book Publication, 2017), 53.

²¹ “Heritage,” *Dictionary.com*.

²² Scholars posit a distinction between the categories of “history” and “heritage” or “history” and “memory.” Maurice Halbwachs, for instance, argued that history stands outside and above social groups; it is objective, scientific, singular. In a similar fashion to Friedrich Nietzsche’s conceptualization, history becomes a kind of deadweight, which privileges difference, change, but also static-ness. Heritage or collective memory, on the other hand, is more dynamic for Halbwachs, and according to Aleida Assmann, it provides meaning and relevance to history. See: Aleida Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” *Social Research* 75:1 (2008): 49–72; Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Alcan, 1925) and *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957 [1872]).

In my reading, I find it more useful to think of history as historiography, that is, the ways in which events are written, periodized, rewritten, and negotiated by scholars. The historian may strive for “objectivity,” but by electing to write about one event over another, one perspective over another, one community over another, the historian has already selected and given priority to one aspect of the past and ignored or concealed others. Thus, all ways of recalling the past—regardless of whether we frame them as heritage- or memory-making practices or as historiography—are incomplete and subjective.

practices to do so.²³ There is a product that results from the process of heritage-making—hence why it is also a noun or an adjective—but heritage-as-a-verb, I contend, highlights the practice that leads to the product. Heritage refers to the *contemporary* use of the past, its histories, memories, and imaginations.²⁴ It is a social exercise, malleable to the wants of individuals and communities, political and strategic.²⁵ It is therefore highly contextual and thus easily susceptible to contestation.²⁶

²³ Heritage-making discourses rely on collective remembering practices in order to be persuasive. They are the mechanisms which enable certain memories, particular narratives of the past, to be remembered over others. The scholarship on cultural memory—embodied in the work of Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, Astrid Erll, Pierre Nora, among others—teaches us that the past is not simply “there” to be remembered; rather, it is a resource deployed to shape identities and to explain who we are today by anchoring its rationale in earlier events. Much like my notion of heritage-as-a-verb, collective remembering is a set of present-day practices informed by the needs of the present, shaped by actors with particular motivations. As such, it is unstable, subjective, and subject to manipulation. Collective remembering is what animates heritage, what gives it meaning. See: Aleida Assmann, “Memory, Individual and Collective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 210–294; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Houndmills, U.K. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

²⁴ Lynn Meskell notes how the past is “multiply claimed, appropriated, erased, or capitalized upon.” In “The Social Life of Heritage,” in *Archaeological Theory Today*, ed. Ian Hodder (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 233.

²⁵ The economic potential and value of heritage production is an important factor driving the heritage industry, where narratives of the past may be shaped to attract investors. Robert Lumley illustrates this dynamic when he demonstrates how, after over forty Japanese companies were located in the North East of England, reassessments of the region’s history were made in order to emphasize its “special relationship” with Japan. Lumley explains: “New open-air museums, such as Beamish and Ironbridge, have been important in attempting to re-create identities for whole areas, promoting a local or regional form of patriotism and aiming in the process to make them more attractive to investors.” In “The Debate on Heritage Reviewed,” in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 20. My emphasis.

²⁶ An object, site, or intangible attribute can mean different things to different audiences. Rhiannon Mason notes this range of meanings, writing that, “an African mask could be viewed as an ethnographic exhibit, a tribal artefact, a piece of art, evidence of colonial looting, the subject of a repatriation case, or simply a commodity to sell.” In every case, the mask remains the same. In “Museums, Galleries and Heritage: Sites of Meaning-Making and Communication,” in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 203.

Within music theory, dissonance refers to the tension created by two tones that do not blend together harmoniously, resulting in a jarring or harsh sound. G.J. Ashworth and John Tunbridge characterize heritage as dissonant when different groups attribute multiple, conflicting interpretations to an object or site, which leads to tension between these groups. Importantly, dissonance is a public expression, emerging in public forums to negotiate the past and its remembrance.²⁷ Many situations can contribute to dissonant heritage, such as colonization and de-colonization, religio-ethnic wars (“dark” heritage), and the commodification of heritage for tourism purposes.²⁸ Though “world” or “universal” heritage—concepts deployed by organizations like UNESCO—has been touted as a tool for unifying people in their shared history, what dissonant heritage demonstrates is that heritage can just as easily work to divide people, when differing interpretations of the past destabilize group dynamics or when the past is coopted by particular groups who intentionally disinherit “Other” groups. Ashworth and Tunbridge focus in particular on the economic uses of heritage—in the ways that commodification, for instance, can contribute to dissonance. In this project, I am especially attuned to adaptations made for tourism that conflict with religious uses of a site.

How and when dissonance is exhibited oftentimes depends on the charisma of select actors. Greek demands for the return of the Parthenon Marbles are a paradigmatic example. Also known as the “Elgin Marbles,”²⁹ these objects are currently housed in the

²⁷ John E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester and New York: J. Wiley, 1996).

²⁸ See, for instance: Milena Dragičević Šešić and Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović, “Balkan Dissonant Heritage Narratives (and Their Attractiveness) for Tourism,” *American Journal of Tourism Management* 3:1b (2014): 10–19.

²⁹ Elgin refers to the seventh Earl of Elgin, Thomas Bruce, the man responsible for removing about half the surviving sculptures of the Parthenon in the early 1800s, after he acquired a now-lost (or, as some have

British Museum. Repatriation demands began as early as the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829) but became much louder and much more public in the 1980s, when Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri (1981–1989, 1993–1994) became particularly vocal on the matter. She appeared in television interviews to argue that the Parthenon Marbles belonged in Greece, and she confronted David M. Wilson, Director of the British Museum (1977–1992), during her visit to the British Museum in 1983 to request their return.³⁰ Mercouri even held an international competition to construct the New Acropolis Museum, which today sits at the base of the Parthenon hill in Athens, constructed after her death, and still awaiting the return of these ancient objects. At stake in this conflict are several issues. One is of ownership: Greece argues that the British Museum has no legal right to the marbles, as permission for their removal was granted, effectively, by a *foreign* government (the Ottomans), which did not represent Greek interest. Another is of representation: according to Greek officials, these sculptures are a prime example of *Greek* heritage, whereas the British Museum understands and presents them as *universal* heritage. A third issue is one of preservation: Greece has accused the United Kingdom of irreparably damaging the marbles, whereas representatives of the latter have argued that

argued, never-existing) *firman*, or official decree, from the then-Ottoman rulers that permitted him to take them. The marbles were purchased by the British government in 1816 and then given to the trusteeship of the British Museum.

³⁰ Defending the British Museum’s ownership of the Parthenon Marbles, David Wilson claimed that the marbles were taken legally: “Much of the material from Third World countries [...] came as a result of gifts and barter and of genuine spirit of scientific enquiry by Europeans eager to know more about the people of the period; the material now housed in museums all over the world was acquired legally and with the full—even eager—permission of their owners.” Wilson even suggested that repatriation demands were acts of vandalism: “The Third World and other countries bent on return and restitution should, however, realize that they are themselves in danger of being considered vandals if they persist in their course with regard to the great international collections.” Quoted in Vasiliki Kynourgiopoulou, “National Identity Interrupted: The Mutilation of the Parthenon Marbles and the Greek Claim for Repatriation,” in *Contested Cultural Heritage: Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World*, ed. Helaine Silverman (New York: Spring, 2011), 160–161.

the British Museum preserved these relics from deterioration. Issues of ownership, representation, and preservation are central to conflicts over heritage.

Charismatic figures like Mercuri can be instrumental for affecting and changing heritage discourse. Charisma, typically understood as a compelling aura or personality that can inspire commitment in others, is an important term in the study of religion, where charisma is sometimes encountered in terms of a divinely conferred power. Those who have sought to return the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia to their religious function—to “save” these sites from their secular state, as Turkish President Erdoğan intended in changing Hagia Sophia back into a mosque—may have seen, or even presented, their mission as a divinely sanctioned one. I explore this dynamic in Chapter 4.

More recent scholarship has pushed back on framing dissonant heritage as a type or subtype of heritage (“dissonant” heritage versus “normal” heritage). Rather, this scholarship argues that all heritage is *intrinsically* dissonant. Because remembering and managing the past is a *contemporary* concern, in which different groups will necessarily have different interpretations, and where values attached to heritage will change over time and across communities, all heritage is dissonant in some form. Indeed, archaeologist Laurajane Smith’s groundbreaking work on “AHD,” or *authorized heritage discourse*, highlights how there is a dominant way of viewing heritage in the West, one “which privileges grand, old, aesthetically pleasing sites, all too often associated with the aristocracy, the church and comforting, sustaining, consensus fables of nationhood,” and one which hides its ideological basis, working to “naturalize a range of assumptions about the nature and meaning of heritage.”³¹ In her view, heritage is the social construct

³¹ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

of the few, thus making it intentionally exclusionary. In particular, Smith argues there have always been conflicts over heritage; all heritage is therefore dissonant. AHD obscures or attempts to neutralize this dissonance,³² making it seem like an exception rather than the rule.

On a more local level, groups like human rights advocates and indigenous communities have challenged AHDs by making dissonance much more visible. If we return to the example of the Parthenon Marbles, we can now reframe this dissonance as a latent quality that became much more active when Minister of Culture Mercuri vocalized Greek demands in a way that had not been done before. Active dissonance can lead to change—perhaps the United Kingdom will agree to return the marbles to Greece sometime in the future³³—and therefore there exists a kind of porousness between latent and active dissonance.

Dissonant heritage is not necessarily problematic—but it certainly can become so. The potential is always there for heritage’s latent quality to become active, for dissonance to reveal the AHD, through charismatic figures, indigenous communities, or other people who disagree with the ways in which the past has been remembered and valued. When this dissonance is activated, we must have the capacity to mitigate it in order to manage the confusions, contestations, and dominant discourses that can result in the exclusion of minority communities, or even in the eruption of violence, as sites like the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India—destroyed by a nationalist Hindu mob in 1992—demonstrate.³⁴

³² Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 82.

³³ Doubtful.

³⁴ Many nationalist Hindus believed Babri Mosque (also known as Babri Masjid) was built on the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama. See: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument: An Embattled Site of History and Memory in Contemporary India,” in *Monuments and Memory, Made and*

This project's two case study sites are striking examples of active dissonant heritage. Their antiquity has resulted in a vast multiplicity of readings, where the value and significance of these ancient monuments has been made and remade many times over. This is true of any ancient site, but I argue that the narratives of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are especially complex because of their history of repurposing, in which ideas of conquest and loss become tied up in their interpretation and representation. In the changing religious uses of these monuments, and in the process of heritage-making and nation-building, different historical truths are remembered, emphasized, or even purposefully forgotten. In particular, dissonance exists between different religious groups making claims to the same site (such as Christians and Muslims who both claim ownership of Hagia Sophia) and between groups who either make "secular" or "religious" claims to heritage sites (such as the residents of Thessaloniki who wish to eliminate religious services or remove religious objects from the Rotunda and others who view the Rotunda as foremost a church). Thus, the categories of the religious, sacred, and secular—their use and their negotiation—are central to this dissonance.

Part of the management challenge for these sites, and other sites of active dissonance, is determining whether one of the most appropriate ways to respond to dissonance is to make room for it—to accommodate it, by actively recognizing the complicated histories of the site and allowing these parallel, competing accounts of the past to coexist in the same space.³⁵ This project thus asks whether such coexistence is

Unmade, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 233–257.

³⁵ Rana Singh, "The Contestation of Heritage: The Enduring Importance of Religion," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2008), 169–208.

possible, through an analysis of the Rotunda—today a monument but occasionally a church—and Hagia Sophia—today a mosque but in many ways still a museum.

Dissonant heritage tells us how the same *space*—the heritage site—can be many different *places* to its stakeholders. Place, to put it simply, is space filled with meaning.³⁶ That is, a place is a space that has been marked out and endowed with value, whereas space is more abstract, less defined. There is a particularity to place, differentiated from the homogeneity of space.³⁷ Place is socially constructed through dynamic processes of interpretation, ritual engagements, and memory-making practices. In my analysis of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, I use the term *space* when referring to and describing the physical building, such as its architectural features, but *place* when the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia emerge as distinct loci of meaning in the narratives and itineraries of their multiple stakeholders. Indeed, thinking about how these two sites are places—in the plural—helps highlight the multiple ways in which they are made and remade by stakeholders.

Religious and/or Sacred

In this project, I use the term “religious” in order to identify a particular subset of heritage. By religious, I mean those forms of heritage that are or were claimed by religious communities or institutions. The word religious is intended to situate this

³⁶ Thomas S. Bremer writes: “Space refers to an undifferentiated expanse lacking in meaningful content,” whereas “place distinguishes particular locales by punctuating the meaningless expanse of space with meaningfulness.” In “Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 25.

³⁷ For a reverse take on this distinction, see: Jeremy F. Walton, “space, place,” *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, 28 February 2020. [Online](#).

heritage within communities of users—religion providing a bond that ties people together—so that we can study the effects of heritage management and preservation on living communities today.³⁸ The term religious, at least as I am using it, does not reflect anything about the *nature* of the heritage, its essence or value. I intentionally use this term in order to think about the use of and access to religious heritage sites.

The term “sacred,” on the other hand, is understood here to refer to the quality, value, or nature of heritage as it constructed, inherited, and/or understood by people. That is, sacred refers to interpretations or understandings that define something as special, as “extraordinary” and “sticking out.”³⁹ Something that is deemed sacred is something that is set apart in some way from the profane, from the everyday—to use sociologist Émile Durkheim’s categorization.⁴⁰ Access to sacred things tends to be circumscribed. The sacred—in its noun form, referring to other-worldly, divine beings or presence—manifests itself through places. Anthropologist T.M. Luhmann notes that certain places have an immense ability to affect people. Holy places in particular, she argues, do so even more: “They give an external presence to something that can only be imagined. They make that which has been imagined real, different and, at times, overwhelming.”⁴¹ Places are made sacred by a sacred presence (the holy). The term sacred thus helps

³⁸ The etymology of religion is obscure. The term may derive from the Latin verb *religare*, meaning to “bind.” Émile Durkheim argued that religion was a force that provides social cohesion and social control. It is the “glue” that binds people together and maintains stability in society. See: *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin and New York: Macmillan Company, 1915).

³⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), 26.

⁴⁰ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*.

⁴¹ T.M. Luhmann, “How Places Let Us Feel the Past,” *The New York Times*, 25 May 2015. [Online](#).

define, among other things, how one uses and accesses a space (for instance, certain areas of a temple are forbidden to the uninitiated), and therefore is a helpful category for understanding why religious communities may take issue with “secular” modes of engagement with such sites (for example, unveiled women in former mosques).

The term sacred, however, is not necessarily bound to religious contexts. As scholars like Veikko Anttonen and M.D.M. Francis argue, the sacred is a category-boundary and a signification-activity wrapped up in a system of beliefs that can be religious, ideological, national, or other.⁴² The idea of the “secular sacred,” as developed by Kim Knott, highlights how the sacred cuts across both the religious and the secular.⁴³ The line between what is sacred and not-sacred is drawn differently by groups and cultures, thus making this designation a culturally dependent one. Places can be sacred because they are set apart from the everyday in some way. Places given special status—historical monuments, UNESCO World Heritage sites—are, I argue, in many ways sacred to their stakeholders. Indeed, all forms of heritage (religious or not) are in some way sacred. By identifying something *as* heritage, as holding extraordinary meaning for some communities, is to deem something sacred. To list something for special recognition and protection on an officially recognized list or registrar of some kind is again to deem it sacred. I explore this topic in more detail in Chapter 3.

⁴² Veikko Anttonen, “Sacred,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 271–282; Matthew D.M. Francis, “Why the ‘Sacred’ Is a Better Resource Than ‘Religion’ for Understanding Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28:5 (2016): 912–927.

⁴³ Kim Knott, “The Secular Sacred: In-between or Both/And?,” in *Social Identities Between the Sacred and the Secular*, ed. Abby Day, Chris Cotter, and Gisell Vincett (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2013), 145–160.

When deploying the terms sacred and religious in this project, I refer to their *social* aspects. I identify and analyze how such distinctions are used, or viewed as inherent, by various stakeholders. I also recognize that the sacred/secular distinction is deeply problematic as many scholars have pointed out.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, these terms continue to be deployed in heritage discourses for various ends. Paying attention to these uses will help identify, in part, *why* conflict over religious heritage sites is a problem that plagues their preservation and management.

In summary, this project reveals the ways in which the religious, sacred, and secular are negotiated at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, and it identifies the impact such contestations have on site access, use, and interpretation today. My aim is to name some of the central issues in these conflicts in order to find paths forward in protecting religious heritage. This project has in mind readers who are interested in but not necessarily experts of religion and/or cultural heritage. It is written to be an accessible piece of scholarship for anyone who is passionate about history and its ongoing influence in the present, and it is intended to highlight the importance of giving space to religious engagements with heritage sites. This project speaks to much more than just the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia. It considers how heritage sites can become important loci for religious revival and for negotiating the role of religion in the modern world.

⁴⁴ See, for instance: James Davison Hunter, "The Culture War and the Sacred/Secular Divide: The Problem of Pluralism and Weak Hegemony," *Social Research* 76:4 (2009): 1307–1322.

Part I: The Past

Introduction¹

Heritage-making has a genealogy. Informed by the work of heritage studies scholar Rodney Harrison,² I situate the development of heritage within three broad and overlapping trends: (1) the nationalization of heritage and its cultivation and expression within national discourses; (2) the universalization of heritage, which in part rendered heritage as a mediator of peace and a locus for understanding what constitutes “humanity”; and (3) the emergence of counternarrative heritage informed by post-nationalist and post-colonialist discourses, in which heritage becomes repossessed by communities who want greater control over the representation of and access to heritage. An overview of these trends will provide a broader context for the trajectories of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Chapters 2–4) and for the dissonance activated at these two sites.

National Heritage

The birth of nationalism in Europe is typically dated to the time of the French Revolution.³ Not unrelatedly, there was a significant shift in the concept and use of heritage around the same time. With the rise of nation-states, intentional acts and rites now aimed to construct and actively recall the *nation's* past. This past was inherited by

¹ Chapters and introductions are intended to stand on their own and therefore full citations repeat with each.

² Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2013).

³ See, for instance: Derek Hastings, *Nationalism in Modern Europe: Politics, Identity and Belonging Since the French Revolution* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). Some scholars have dated nationalism or a national consciousness to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, though this is a minority position. Liah Greenfeld, for instance, suggests that England was the frontrunner in the sixteenth century. See: *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

each nation's citizens as *their* own past. Events, characters, monuments, rituals, and traditions were selectively curated to form a sense of national identity. To be French, for instance, was to recognize the importance of figures like Marianne, the national personification of the Republic of France; it was to share in, engage with, and even homogenize memories and experiences of places like Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris; it was to participate in, enjoy, and be proud of banal, quotidian rituals like drinking coffee and wine.⁴

According to Pierre Nora, the historian who popularized the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), nation-building projects “emphasized the *site*: the goal was to exhume significant sites, to identify the most obvious and crucial centers of national memory, and then to reveal the existence of invisible bonds tying them all together.”⁵ State-created inventories of all important historic sites, objects, and other cultural resources began in the nineteenth century.⁶ France's *Commission nationale des monuments historiques*, for instance, was established in 1837 and published its first official list of the nation's historic monuments in 1840.⁷ According to Harrison, this inventory—which valued and classed buildings based on their construction date, architectural style, and associated events—would establish an inventory pattern replicated

⁴ The partial destruction of Notre Dame Cathedral in a 2019 fire demonstrates the site's influence in French consciousness. The fire caused an inpouring of donations—or more specifically, *promises* of large donations (to the tune of hundreds of millions of euros)—by public donors and companies who viewed this unfortunate event as one “which touches the heart of our country.” For a discussion on how some of the donations have not materialized, or have been slow to do so, see: Megan Cerullo, “French Billionaires Slow-Walk Donations to Rebuild Notre Dame,” *CBS News*, 5 July 2019. [Online](#).

⁵ Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), xvii. Emphasis in the original.

⁶ Of course, one could argue that lists of culturally significant sites have been around for a long time—the “seven wonders of the world” being a prime example.

⁷ “France. Commission des monuments historiques (1837-...),” *FranceArchives*, n.d. [Online](#).

in other nation-states, and eventually by UNESCO through its World Heritage list.⁸ More importantly, what these lists, inventories, descriptions, and other forms of documentation effectively did for heritage was create a practice (heritage-making) and a profession to manage this practice (heritage professionals, such as architects and museum employees). Identifying cultural goods as heritage went hand-in-hand with an obligation to preserve and manage them.

Archaeology was and still is central to nation-building projects. It is often the science that supports national narratives, providing material evidence of their truthfulness and authenticity.⁹ Archaeological evidence, and the narratives that interpret it, is used to prove that there exists stability and continuity in identity and culture through time. As such, archaeology is necessarily political in nature. Examining which projects are funded, who funds them, and who controls them reveals the powerful interests at work in controlling the past. When Thessaloniki and Istanbul were made part of nation-states at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a conscious effort by politicians and intellectuals to disassociate these cities from their Ottoman predecessors, a topic I consider in Chapter 2. Through transformations of their urban landscapes, which erased many traces of an Ottoman presence, Thessaloniki and Istanbul were made into Greek and Turkish cities, respectively. The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia were inscribed as monuments, testimonies to the cities' multicultural, multireligious, and imperial histories, simultaneously preserving and ignoring their Ottoman history.

⁸ Harrison, *Heritage*, 44.

⁹ See Chapter 6 for a critical reading of “authenticity” as it is deployed in the heritage field.

Universal Heritage

The concept of universal heritage—the idea that heritage is not bound by national borders, but belongs to everyone, on the basis of their shared humanity—is one that grew out of post-World War II Europe, a continent that had witnessed the dangers of narrow or exclusive national narratives and identities. The rebuilding of Europe not only addressed the physical damages caused by the war but also sought to avert such disaster in the future. Consequently, the United Nations was established in 1945 with the aim of maintaining international peace and security, and with it, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a specialized agency of the United Nations, which would focus on international development and cooperation in the fields of education, science, and culture.¹⁰ UNESCO was concerned over the massive destruction of heritage that resulted from the war, which ranged from the looting of art to what may have been a targeted destruction of some historical monuments.¹¹ This concern led to the adoption of the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, also known as The Hague Convention, as it was signed at The Hague in the Netherlands. This document suggested a need to protect cultural heritage through *international* intervention.

¹⁰ UNESCO's constitution declares: "Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed." In "UNESCO in Brief," n.d. [Online](#).

¹¹ Nicola Lambourne analyzes whether historic monuments were specifically targeted for destruction by either Allied or Axis forces during the war. The general destruction of historic monuments and cities, she notes, was not a new feature of war, but "the novelty lay in its greatly increased extent and in the technology used to cause such damage," such as through aerial bombardments (*War Damage in Western Europe: The Destruction of Historic Monuments During the Second World War* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001], 1). Lambourne concludes that although countries professed the "sanctity" of monuments and art in the press, and although they claimed to have avoided cultural damage, very little was actually done to circumvent damaging or destroying cultural property (210).

UNESCO and likeminded organizations universalized the concept of heritage through large-scale projects such as the Nubian Salvage Campaign in Aswan, Egypt. When a new dam was to be built on the Nile River in the 1960s, this campaign brought together about fifty nations to carry out rescue archaeological excavations and to relocate twenty-three massive monuments from Egypt and Sudan. According to the logic propounded by UNESCO officials, the loss of Nubian heritage would be tragic not only for Egyptians and the Sudanese, but for all people. Georges Fradier wrote in the *UNESCO Courier*: “The monuments of ancient Egypt, among them Philae, Amada, Kalabasha and Abu Simbel, are in danger. [...] What it really means is that *we ourselves are in danger*.”¹² The loss of these monuments will cause a portion of “our” memories to become “amputate[d].”¹³ Heritage was no longer contained within national borders; rather, it was now the responsibility of all of humankind to safeguard.

This is not to argue that national heritage ceased to exist, but rather a notion was born that heritage reached beyond borders, beyond communities and nations, which was to be collectively maintained for the benefit of future generations.¹⁴ As a result, many within and outside the heritage profession have defended the need to safeguard

¹² Georges Fradier, “The Drama of Nubia,” *UNESCO Courier*, Special Edition (1960): 5. My emphasis.

¹³ Fradier, “The Drama of Nubia,” 5. According to this rhetoric, there is something very real, almost tangible, in the loss of heritage, where humans risk becoming amnesiac without monuments to remind them of their formidable past.

¹⁴ Though it may seem that this concept of universal or world heritage is something new, distinct to the post-World War II era, Elliott Colla points out that European countries frequently spoke of antiquities in terms of their significance for human civilization. Such nations were especially interested in the heritage located in the borders of countries that were once home to great empires—and great ancient civilizations—such as Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq, among other countries), and Persia (modern-day Iran). European looting of antiquities was done for the “love of antiquity,” and those who interfered to save these ancient resources from “barbaric” areas understood their work as a civilizing mission. See: *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

monuments and objects in other parts of the world as a service to humanity. James Cuno's conclusions in his controversial book *Who Owns Antiquity?*, for instance, fit within this trend:

Antiquities are the cultural property of all humankind—of *people*, not *peoples*—evidence of the world's ancient past and not that of a particular modern nation. They comprise antiquity, and antiquity knows no borders. [...] It cannot be subdivided and nationalized. Its influence is boundless, uncontainable. We all have stake in its survival, in all of its forms, everywhere. We must find better ways to protect antiquity than by simply giving our unthinking endorsement to national retentionist cultural property laws.¹⁵

This kind of rhetoric implies some alarming consequences. It supports interventionist tactics, where foreign societies are viewed by western European and North American professionals as incapable of protecting their own heritage. It certainly played and continues to play a role in the conflict over the Parthenon Marbles (Introduction).

Representatives of the British Museum continue to claim that the removal of the marbles from Athens and their conservation at the museum saved these objects from decay. They further argue that the artifact's current home in a free-of-charge universal museum¹⁶ allows anyone to view these historical objects—unhindered by an entrance fee—and to appreciate them within a context that celebrates ancient civilizations more broadly.¹⁷

¹⁵ James C. Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 146–147. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ A universal or encyclopedic museum is an institution whose collections consist of objects from around the world, not just from the nation in which it is located. The British Museum, along with a number of other large, predominantly North American and European museums, signed the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums” in 2002. It defends the existence of and need for universal museum, stating: “The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums.” It claims that “museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation.” Quoted in Isaac Kaplan, “The Case Against the Universal Museum,” *Artsy.net*, 26 April 2016. [Online](#).

¹⁷ Critics have argued that some museums deploy the concept of a universal museum as a defense for looted objects in their collections. Archaeologist George Abungu, for instance, writes that this type of museum is

This language celebrating heritage's universal value to humankind was ultimately reproduced at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, through their listing as UNESCO World Heritage sites. This distinction acknowledged the importance of these two sites not only for Thessalonians and Istanbulites, not just for Greeks and Turks, but for all people, constituting a part of humanity's collective memory. When certain stakeholders wished to see the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia function as religious sites in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, others criticized these demands as an affront to the communal ownership and stewardship of these ancient sites. As Chapter 4 demonstrates, Hagia Sophia's UNESCO listing was used by critics as a rationale against converting the site into a mosque. According to their logic, the religious use of this site—or at least the *Muslim* religious use of it—went against principles of universality and humanity.

Counternarrative Heritage

In the past few decades, there has been an ever-growing resistance to national and universal heritage discourses, most often by groups who have been forgotten or even intentionally erased from these narratives. This is particularly true with indigenous groups, whose denial has been the subject of much scholarship. Art historian Sally Promey, for instance, in her discussion of public display of religion in Hawai'i, argues that the state's urban landscape reflects its colonized status, where Christian historic religious buildings and monuments have been selected for preservation, in turn creating a hegemonic history that excludes indigenous heritage. She writes: "This kind of selectivity

in fact "fighting to preserve its own heritage, not the world's." Quoted in Kaplan, "The Case Against the Universal Museum."

is not neutral but shapes the histories that can be recollected, *the identities that can be most publicly considered American.*”¹⁸ There has been an increased recognition by scholars that multiple voices, narratives, and experiences need to be included in heritage management.¹⁹ Those who advocate for source community ownership argue that heritage enables communities to exhibit agency over objects that shape their histories and identities. As indigenous scholar Rosalind Langford remarked, “If we Aborigines cannot control our own heritage, what the hell can we control?”²⁰ Control of heritage is therefore part of larger questions of community control and political legitimacy.²¹

Because of heritage-making discourses’ perceived secularizing power, some religious groups have viewed themselves as the marginalized or forgotten voices in the

¹⁸ Sally Promey, “Material Establishment and Public Display,” *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*, 2016. [Online](#). My emphasis.

¹⁹ Through this increased inclusion of and space given to counternarratives, more attention has been given to the different “types” of heritage, such as intangible heritage. While many North American and European museums focused on the monumental and on the tangible in their celebration on the past, critics highlighted the value of rituals, songs, dances, and other practices not easily captured in the museum space. As a result, in 2008 UNESCO acknowledged the value of intangible forms of heritage through the creation of the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

²⁰ Quoted in Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 287. Emphasis in the original.

²¹ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 295. The ownership and control of indigenous human remains has been an important aspect of heritage management. In such cases, indigenous groups, museum representatives, and scientists may make claims to these materials. The remains of the Kennewick Man / The Ancient One is a helpful example. On 28 July 1996, the skeletal remains of a prehistoric Paleoamerican man were discovered in Kennewick, Washington. Indigenous communities, such as the Umatilla people, wanted to rebury the remains, claiming ownership under the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. The archaeologists who discovered the skeleton wanted scientific right to study the bones. The case became embroiled in the legal courts for nearly a decade. The courts ruled that there was not enough evidence to provide a cultural link between Native American communities and the skeletal remains, and so the remains were given over to the scientific community. Scientists studied the 8,500-year-old bones, and in 2015, the University of Copenhagen determined that genetic links could be made between the bones and modern indigenous groups. The bones were reburied by over 200 tribe members in February 2017. See: Morten Rasmussen, Martin Sikora, et al., “The Ancestry and Affiliations of Kennewick Man,” *Nature* 523 (2015): 455–458; Amy Klinkhammer, “Kennewick Man’s Bones Reburied, Settling a Decades-Long Debate,” *Discover Magazine*, 21 February 2017. [Online](#).

management of religious heritage, even when such groups may present a majority population. When access to religious sites becomes more limited or even restricted after they are made into museums or monuments, religious communities may experience or display frustration, anger, or even an inability to understand how a religious place can function as anything other than a religious place. As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, this dynamic was certainly at play at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These issues get at larger questions of political legitimacy—such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s attempt to gain power through the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque—as well as religious legitimacy, where the rights of religious groups to access heritage sites may be viewed as a matter of human right.

As a result of these opposing forces—national, universal, and marginalized voices—heritage has become an important locus for states, international bodies, heritage professionals, and religious and non-religious citizens to negotiate and regulate the boundaries of religion at heritage sites today and the space given to religious places in the modern world. The meaning of heritage, its identification and value, is always context-specific. These different stakeholders, intentionally or not, shape the meaning of religious space in the modern world. However, before exploring this dynamic as it plays out at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, I turn to Chapter 1, which situates these religious places in their premodern context.

Chapter 1: Remaking Space and Place through Religious Conversion

“Through the centuries, to control the Hagia Sophia’s identity has meant controlling the identity of society more broadly.”¹

The Rotunda of Thessaloniki, Greece, as its name suggests, is a round structure.² The original building has survived mostly intact, though it has undergone many architectural adaptations over the centuries. Today, it has eight barrel-vaulted niches and walls that are over six meters thick, which likely helped it survive multiple earthquakes over the centuries. The building is covered by a nearly thirty-meter-high dome decorated with now fragmented mosaics. An altar³ lengthens the Rotunda on its eastern end, and a minaret flanks one side of the building. Ottoman tombs are located in the burial precinct east of the Rotunda’s altar, a nonoperational water fountain sits to the west of the building, a small open-air archaeological site extends out of the altar to the south, and a

¹ Anna Bigelow, “Hagia Sophia’s Tears and Smiles: The Ambivalent Life of a Global Monument,” in *Istanbul: Living with Difference in a Global City* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 118.

² It is only starting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that extant sources use the name “Rotunda” to designate this building (for instance, French merchant and traveler Paul Lucas does so in the early eighteenth century). Historical references to the Rotunda are generally very limited, and, because its original Christian name has been forgotten, it is very difficult to determine when texts are referencing this particular building. Several names have been proposed. For instance, G.I. Theocharides argues that “the Church of the Archangels or Asomatoi,” a name recorded by the monk Theodore the Studite around the year 800, refers to the Rotunda. However, according to Walter E. Kleinbauer, late Byzantine sources suggest that the Church of the Archangels was an episcopal church, and therefore presumably the local cathedral. He argues that the Rotunda lacks features that would have allowed it to function as a cathedral (such as a baptistery), and therefore it is unlikely to be the Church of the Archangels referenced by Theodore. We know from *Travels in Northern Greece* that when W.M. Leake stayed in Thessaloniki in 1806, the Rotunda was known as “Eski Metropoli,” or Old Metropolis. For more information about this debate, see: Kleinbauer, “The Original Name and Function of Hagios Georgios at Thessaloniki,” in *Cahiers Archéologiques: Fin de l’antiquité et Moyen Age*, Vol. XXII, ed. André Grabar and Jean Hubert (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1972), 55–60.

³ An altar is alternatively known as a sanctuary. As noted in the Introduction, there are differences in terminology between the Orthodox/Eastern and Catholic/Western Christian traditions. I will generally deploy the terminology of the former, given the project’s focus on a Greek case study.

cashier's office is set up at the site's main entrance.⁴ While the original round structure was erected for Roman imperial use in the fourth century, possibly as a temple or mausoleum, the altar and mosaics confirm the Rotunda's later use as a church. The minaret and fountain testify to the site's subsequent function as a mosque, while the exposed archaeological site as well as the cashier's office reflect the site's current status as a monument and museum. The Rotunda's different features speak to the site's complex history of repurposing.

Nestled in the heart of Istanbul, Turkey, Hagia Sophia is a large building with a massive dome—over fifty-meters high, and thirty-meters in diameter.⁵ Located in a metropolitan center that, as one scholar puts it, sits “at the crossroads of the world,” Hagia Sophia's size is imposing.⁶ Built by Byzantine Emperor Justinian I in the sixth century, it was the world's largest church until the completion of Vatican City's St. Peter's Basilica in the seventeenth century. The building itself measures eighty-two by seventy-three meters: It would be among the top twenty largest churches in the world, had it remained a church, but it is the fortieth largest mosque, as of 2021.⁷ The building dwarfs the Rotunda. Hagia Sophia houses several mosaics, marble pillars, an upper

⁴ The excavation site acts as physical proof of the Rotunda's former use as a church. Architectural features include part of the ambulatory, the south propylon (also known as a propylaeum, a structure forming the entrance to a temple), and two annexes which were later made into a burial chamber.

⁵ Hagia Sophia goes by different spellings, depending on one's linguistic, geographical, or religious milieu, such as Saint Sophia, Church of the Great Wisdom, Ayasofya, etc. “Hagia” (Ἁγία) means “holy” and “Sophia” (Σοφία) means “wisdom” in Greek.

⁶ Thomas F. Madden, *City of Majesty at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: Viking, 2016).

⁷ However, for centuries, Hagia Sophia was recognized as one of the largest religious structures in the world: “Until the 15th century, no building incorporated a floor space so vast under one roof.” In Fergus M. Bordewich, “A Monumental Struggle to Preserve Hagia Sophia,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2008. [Online](#).

gallery, a minbar (pulpit), a mihrab (niche indicating the direction of Mecca), and large nineteenth-century medallions or disks inscribed with the names of Allah, Muhammad, and the first four caliphs (chief Muslim religious rulers regarded as successors of Muhammad). The building is flanked by four minarets, a sultan's lodge, a timekeeper's building, and an Islamic educational institution known as a madrasa. While its minbar, mihrab, and minarets attest to its use as a mosque, its mosaics of Christ, Mary, and other important Christian figures speak to the site's equally significant Christian function. As an internationally recognized World Heritage Site, a UNESCO plaque and a cashier's office testify to the site's former status as a monument and museum. Like the Rotunda, these different features of Hagia Sophia bear testimony to the site's textured history of conversion.

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are excellent examples of architectural palimpsests. In textual studies, the term palimpsest refers to a parchment, from a book or scroll, on which the original or earlier forms of writing have been scraped off so that the page can be reused for a new text. However, this act of erasure does not completely remove the previous inscription, and therefore traces of it remain visible through the parchment.⁸ For this reason, the term palimpsest is also used to refer to something that has features or layers beneath its visible surface. The palimpsest serves as a potent metaphor for understanding the transformations of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, sites whose significance and physical appearance have been rewritten multiple times, as the

⁸ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1982), xi. Because previous inscriptions were not entirely erased, scholars have been able to recover earlier layers of texts from some manuscripts. One famous example is *De Re Publica*, or *On the Republic*, by the Roman orator Cicero. A fourth-century copy of the text was replaced by Augustine's *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* in the seventh century. In Ralph W. Mathisen, "Paleography and Codicology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 148.

two changed political hands and as they shifted in function. Previous versions (as church, mosque, and museum) can still be detected in later ones. Indeed, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are remarkably useful representations of the political and religious shifts that occurred in the cities of Thessaloniki and Istanbul. Historian Mark Mazower, for instance, remarks that the Rotunda’s “multiple re-incarnations as church, mosque, museum and art centre encapsulated the city’s endless metamorphoses.”⁹ Middle East analyst Kalim Rajab makes similar remarks about Hagia Sophia: “Like the city she inhabits, [Hagia Sophia] has served as both cradle as well as cemetery to the myriad civilisations which have sought her sustenance. In this way she is essentially a palimpsest; a stratified layer upon layer of memory and preservation.”¹⁰ The complex and evolving lives of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, as later chapters will demonstrate, have made preserving, presenting, and memorializing these two sites a challenging task in the twentieth century and today.

In what follows, I briefly identify some important layers of these palimpsestic sites in order to discuss those metamorphoses that have directly impacted how the site is currently interpreted and negotiated. In doing so, I hope to allude to the complexity and richness of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia’s pasts to hint at the difficulties in memorializing their histories today. Simultaneously, my narrative will at times place the ancient and modern cities side by side, demonstrating how the past—embodied in the

⁹ Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430–1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 4.

¹⁰ Kalim Rajab, “The Hagia Sophia as Palimpsest: Memories of the Monument in Five Acts,” *Scroll.in*, 2 August 2020. [Online](#).

city’s architecture, archaeology, and landscape—informs and sometimes disrupts the present.

The Rotunda and Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki—historically known by many names, including Thessalonica, Thessalonikē, Salonica, and Salonika¹¹—was founded in the late seventh century BCE, then known as Therma. The city was refounded¹² in 315 BCE by Cassander of Macedon, governor of the Macedonian empire and later its king (305–297 BCE). He was one of the Diadochi¹³ who warred over Alexander the Great’s empire after the latter’s death in 323 BCE. Cassander took inhabitants from twenty-six villages and hamlets nearby present-day Thessaloniki and resettled them in the region’s first planned urban center.¹⁴ After the fall of the Macedonian kingdom in 168 BCE to the Roman Republic, Thessaloniki was made the administrative capital of the Roman province of Macedonia in 146 BCE.

¹¹ According to Mark Mazower, there are at least a dozen variants to the city’s name, thus making Thessaloniki “an indexer’s nightmare and a linguist’s delight” (*Salonica, City of Ghosts*, 17). For the sake of simplicity and consistency, I will refer to the city as Thessaloniki throughout this project. In 1937, the Greek state legislated that the city must be referred to as Thessaloniki. The Turkish Postal Service Law made a similar request in 1930, requiring that mail be addressed to Istanbul and not Constantinople. See: Devin E. Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

¹² There was a deep-water port northwest of Therma, which Cassander used to expand the settlement into what he would rename Thessalonike. The name derives from Θεσσαλός (Thessalos) and Νίκη (Victory), meaning “Thessalonian victory.”

¹³ The Diadochi is the name given to the first generation of military and political leaders who fought over and carved up Alexander the Great’s vast empire. Cassander, one of Alexander’s generals, would end up controlling Macedonia and Greece. After a few decades of warring, three states emerged from Alexander’s former empire: Antigonid Macedonia, Ptolemaic Egypt, and the Seleucid kingdom in Asia. The word Diadochi comes from Διάδοχοι, meaning “successors.”

¹⁴ Ioannis K. Hassiotis, *Queen of the Worthy: Thessaloniki, History and Culture* (Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, 1997), 18.

Under the Romans, Thessaloniki prospered. Like other major cities of the Roman world, a variety of religious cults and centers operated in Thessaloniki. Inscriptions, for instance, demonstrate how Egyptian gods, such as Isis, were worshipped in some circles.¹⁵ The city had its own tutelary deities, the enigmatic Samothracian Cabeiri,¹⁶ who were deities of the underworld worshiped in a mystery cult. Already in the 50s CE, Thessaloniki became one of the early centers of the Christian movement, after one of Jesus' early followers, Paul the Apostle, went into the local synagogue and preached to Jews,¹⁷ who made up a sizeable community in the city.¹⁸

When Emperor Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into a tetrarchy (a system of government comprised of a four-part division of the empire) at the end of the third century, Thessaloniki was made into one of the administrative capitals and assigned to the Caesar of the East.¹⁹ At this time, the city was made up of tradesmen and guilds and was strategically situated on the Via Egnatia, a road connecting travelers across east and west between Europe and Asia Minor. Sometime in the late third century, Emperor Galerius commissioned a series of new buildings to form part of the city's imperial precinct, including a palace, a hippodrome, a triumphal arch, and the Rotunda, among

¹⁵ According to Charles Edson, one of these inscriptions was a hymn of divine virtues dedicated to Isis, a major goddess in ancient Egyptian religion. See: "Cults of Thessalonica (Macedonica III)," *Harvard Theological Review* 41:3 (1948): 153–204.

¹⁶ Mazower, *Salonica: City of Ghosts*, 19.

¹⁷ Narrated in the Christian Bible, in Acts of the Apostles 17:1–10.

¹⁸ Hassiotis, *Queen of the Worthy*, 20.

¹⁹ The other three capital cities under the Tetrarchy were Milan, Trier, and Antioch.

others.²⁰ It was also during this time that some of the city's main streets were traced, connecting Thessaloniki to intersecting arteries of the city and to the sea. Not long after, at the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, the city's walls were erected, which impressively remain more or less intact to this day, despite the many attacks and sieges waged against the city over the centuries.²¹ Many of the buildings and streets that come from this period not only emerge within the landscape of the modern-city, but they also continue to orient citizens and visitors alike in their movements in and around the city, a topic which I discuss in Chapter 2.

The original purpose of the Rotunda is not entirely clear. Scholars debate whether the Rotunda was constructed to be Emperor Galerius' mausoleum,²² his throne room,²³ or a temple dedicated to Zeus.²⁴ Art historian Slobodan Ćurčić has suggested that it was commissioned to be the mausoleum of Constantine the Great, an emperor who was active in the Balkans between the years 318 and 324 CE.²⁵ The Rotunda, according to Ćurčić's

²⁰ Laura Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki: Interpreting the Early Christian Rotunda," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13:4 (2005): 474.

²¹ Thessaloniki has been attacked and captured by a variety of peoples, including the Goths (late fourth century), Avars and Slaves (late sixth to early seventh century), Bulgars (late ninth to early thirteenth century), Arabs (904), Normans (1185), Franks (1204), Catalans (1308), and the Ottomans. In Hassiotis, *Queen of the Worthy*, 21.

²² Ejnar Dyggve, "La région palatiale de Thessalonique," in *Acta congressus Madvigiani I* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1958), 361. Aristotle Mentzos argues against such an identification, noting that Galerius' mausoleum was recently identified outside Gamzigrad, Serbia; the Rotunda's size is significantly larger than other mausoleums; and no subterranean tomb chamber was built. In "Reflections on the Interpretation and the Dating of the Rotunda of Thessaloniki," *EGNATIA* 6:2 (2002): 61.

²³ George G. Penelis and Gregory G. Penelis, *Structural Restoration of Masonry Monuments: Arches, Domes and Walls* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020), 251.

²⁴ Eutychia Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou and Anastasia Tourta, for instance, argue that this temple use is more likely, given that Zeus was the patron god to Diocletian and Galerius. In *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki* (Athens: Kapon Editions, 1997), 50.

²⁵ Slobodan Ćurčić, "Christianization of Thessalonikē: The Making of Christian 'Urban Iconography'," in *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archaeology*, ed. Laura Nasrallah, et

working hypothesis, was left unfinished when the emperor shifted his focus toward Constantinople (today's Istanbul) after defeating Licinius in 324. Ćurčić doubts the Rotunda was used as a temple given there are no other architecturally comparable Roman temples, with the exception of the Pantheon in Rome.²⁶ If Ćurčić's hypothesis proves correct, the Rotunda would have been erected after 313, when the emperors Constantine and Licinius signed the Edict of Milan, a decree proclaiming religious tolerance throughout the Roman Empire, and thus legalizing the practice of Christianity.

Few scholars have suggested that the Rotunda was built to be a church, suggesting that its later use as one entailed a shift in the site's access, physical appearance, and meaning.²⁷ It is likely when it was initially built in the early fourth century that the building was left unfinished, without a roof,²⁸ or finished but undecorated and unused for some time.²⁹ Depending on when exactly it was converted, the Rotunda may have been in a semi-ruinous state after an earthquake hit the area in the year 363.³⁰

al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 213–244. More recently, Charalambos Bakirtzis and Pelli Mastora have made the same argument, offering a new interpretation of the Rotunda's mosaics as a result (for instance, they argue that Constantine is depicted alongside two Victories in one of the mosaic panels). See: "Are the Mosaics in the Rotunda into Thessaloniki Linked to its Conversion as a Christian Church?," in *Niš and Byzantium*, ed. Miša Rakocija (Niš: University of Niš, 2011), 33–45.

²⁶ Although other circular temples existed in Rome or elsewhere in the ancient world, these featured external colonnades, and none, unlike what we see with the Rotunda and the Pantheon, had windows in the exterior walls of their cella, or inner chambers. In Ćurčić, "Christianization of Thessalonikē," 215, ft. 5.

²⁷ For a list of scholars who have argued that the Rotunda was originally designed as a church, see: Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki," 474, ft. 17.

²⁸ Hjalmar Torp, "Dogmatic Themes in the Mosaics of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki," *Arte medieval* 1 (2002): 11.

²⁹ Ćurčić, *Some Observations and Questions*, 25. However, for arguments against this theory of a century-long unfinished, exposed Rotunda, see: Mentzos, "Reflections on the Interpretation," 62–63.

³⁰ Ćurčić, *Some Observations and Questions*, 26. Earthquakes have been an important threat to the integrity of ancient sites in Thessaloniki, both in the past and in the modern world, with the last major earthquake occurring in 1978.

As the urban landscape of Thessaloniki slowly shifted in relation to the city's growing Christian population, the Rotunda underwent important changes. Sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries, the site was converted into a church. The exact date is unknown because no writings survive documenting its conversion, but scholars have usually considered the city's historical context and analyzed the style of the Rotunda's mosaics when giving an approximate conversion date.³¹ The Rotunda would remain a church for at least a millennium.

As one of the earliest surviving churches in a significant early Christian center, the Rotunda is an important archaeological and architectural witness to late ancient Christianity. However, there are very few textual sources attesting to the Christian Rotunda. Aside from not knowing when the building was converted and by whom, scholars also do not know what kind of church it was converted into and who had access to it. Indeed, historian Aristotle Mentzos argues that the lack of references to the Rotunda in Middle Byzantine sources suggests that the site was not accessible to the public, though we do not know this for certain.³² Our evidence for architectural shifts at the site—namely its transition into a church—come from twentieth-century archaeological reports, drafted when the Rotunda was converted into a monument. The date of the building's conversion has been an especially important question, perhaps because the

³¹ Nasrallah's "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki" helpfully summarizes the scholarly debate on dating the Rotunda's conversion. She notes that two main methods have been used for hypothesizing the date: "analysis of the relative age of the brickwork, or speculation about the style of the mosaics" (481, ft. 41).

³² Mentzos, "Reflections on the Interpretation," 69. The Rotunda may have served as a palatial church, though scholars disagree. Dyggve and Mentzos argue for this function, whereas Kleinbauer questions the evidence, as it is unclear how long the palace complex functioned in Thessaloniki and to what extent the Rotunda was connected to it. Chapter 3 summarizes some of the archaeological evidence.

earlier its establishment, the greater the importance that can be given to its role in early Christian history.

When it was repurposed into a church, the Rotunda underwent important architectural changes. Each addition to the site impacted how visitors would access and move around the building, and how particular Christian practices and rituals were carried out in the space. An apse and ambulatory³³ were added to the eastern end of the building, substantially enlarging the site, and the walls of the Rotunda's niches were pierced to give access to this ambulatory.³⁴ The southern portico, the area leading to the entrance of the building, was expanded with annexes.³⁵ In the sixth century, when the Rotunda may have temporarily served as Thessaloniki's cathedral,³⁶ the building received a monumental ambo (a pulpit with steps on each end),³⁷ and possibly a baptistery and episcopal residence as well.³⁸ These architectural changes enabled the space to function as a church, by permitting ritual practices like communion and baptism to take place.

³³ An apse is a semicircular recess covered with a dome where the altar is located. An ambulatory is an aisled space that forms a continuous processional way around the east end of a church.

³⁴ Penelis and Penelis, *Structural Restoration of Masonry Monuments*, 251.

³⁵ Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki," 484.

³⁶ Ćurčić, *Some Observations and Questions*, 26. Thessaloniki's Hagia Sophia, one of the oldest churches in the city, typically served as the city's cathedral. The Rotunda again served in this capacity when Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque by Ottoman rulers in 1430, until the Rotunda was itself converted into a mosque (for an argument against the Rotunda's cathedral status, see: Kleinbauer, "The Original Name and Function"). The status of cathedral signifies that the church is the principal church within a particular diocese and is run by a bishop. The title does not reflect the size or ornateness of the building.

³⁷ This ambo is now housed in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. According to Theocharis Pazaras, Turks took it to Istanbul in 1900. In *The Rotunda of Saint George in Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1985), 47.

³⁸ Ćurčić, *Some Observations and Questions*, 26. Nikolaos K. Moutsopoulos interprets an octagonal hall to the west of the Rotunda's vestibule as a baptistery (see: Mentzos, "Reflections on the Interpretation"). Kleinbauer notes the lack of archaeological evidence for a baptistery. In "The Original Name and Function," 56.

On a few occasions, some of these architectural features were destroyed or damaged by earthquakes, such as the dome in the sixth and seventh centuries, and the ambulatory and choir in the seventh century. Around this time, the niches were walled up, as they continue to be today.³⁹ In fact, it appears some of the Christian adaptations to the Rotunda weakened parts of the building, likely leading to later damage.⁴⁰ Thus, while the conversion of the Rotunda gave a new use—and therefore a new life—to the building, this very conversion, with the architectural adaptations it entailed, placed additional pressure on its structure. Its conversion can be interpreted as simultaneously an act of preservation (ensuring the building’s ongoing use and perpetuity) and a preservation risk (the building was weakened with architectural adaptations). Though heritage destruction and preservation are typically seen as opposing forces, later chapters will consider them as two sides of the same coin.

One of the most significant additions made to the Rotunda when it was converted into a church was its impressive program of mosaics, which are located in three of the seven barrel vaults, as well as in the building’s dome. Dating these mosaics is often interdependent on the conversion of the building,⁴¹ which itself, as I noted above, is uncertain. Hjalmar Torp, for instance, theorizes that the Rotunda was decorated with

³⁹ Bente Kiilerich and Hjalmar Torp, *The Rotunda in Thessaloniki and its Mosaics* (Athens: Kapon Editions, 2017), 10.

⁴⁰ See: Penelis and Penelis, *Structural Restoration of Masonry Monuments*.

⁴¹ Bakirtzis and Mastora argue that the Rotunda was already decorated with mosaics when it was converted into a church. That is, the mosaics’ iconography is not exclusively Christian and therefore any particular Christian associations, such as the identification of the praying males with Christian martyrs or saints “is no more than speculation.” In “Are the Mosaics in the Rotunda,” 36.

The dating of the mosaics is not important here. Even if the mosaics were designed prior to the building’s conversion into a church, they nevertheless existed within the context of a Christian building for hundreds of years and so were interpreted in light of the building’s function.

mosaics at the end of the fourth century, when the building was finished by Emperor Theodosius I.⁴² Regardless of the exact dating, these ancient mosaics have managed to survive plastering (when the Rotunda was converted into a mosque) and multiple earthquakes—though not without suffering a lot of damage.

The mosaics are arranged into three superimposed areas (Figures 7–8). The innermost zone originally portrayed Christ in a flowing robe, which we know from the extant preparatory sketch, observable to visitors today. Only the very top section of Christ’s head and a few fingers from one hand are visible in the sketch. Supporting this inner medallion are four beings with wings, presumably angels, where only three heads are visible. Halos and the top of their wings can still be seen. Between two of the angels, one can identify the head of an animal, probably a peacock, with light rays shining out. Between these figures, the mosaic shines bright with gold tesserae, the small, individual tile pieces that form the larger image. This depiction—of a full-figured Christ in a circular disk supported by angels—is a common image in early Christianity.⁴³

In the middle zone, which is mostly gone today, we see the brickwork that lies beneath the mosaic program. Visible cracks in the masonry highlight the damaging effects of multiple earthquakes over the centuries. In the lowest registry of this middle zone, there remain a few sandal-clad feet on a green background. According to Bente Kiilerich and Hjalmar Torp, these fragments suggest that the middle zone originally

⁴² Hjalmar Torp, “The Date of the Conversion of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki into a Church,” in *The Norwegian Institute at Athens: The First Five Lectures*, ed. Øivind Andersen and Helène Whittaker (Athens: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1991), 13–28.

⁴³ John Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek, “Apocalyptic Themes in the Monumental and Minor Art of Early Christianity,” in *Pottery, Pavements, and Paradise: Iconographic and Textual Studies on Late Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 368. For a comparable example, see images of the altar mosaic in the Basilica di San Vitale in Ravenna.



Figure 7: Hypothetical reconstruction of the Rotunda's mosaic program. Image on display inside the Rotunda (2019).

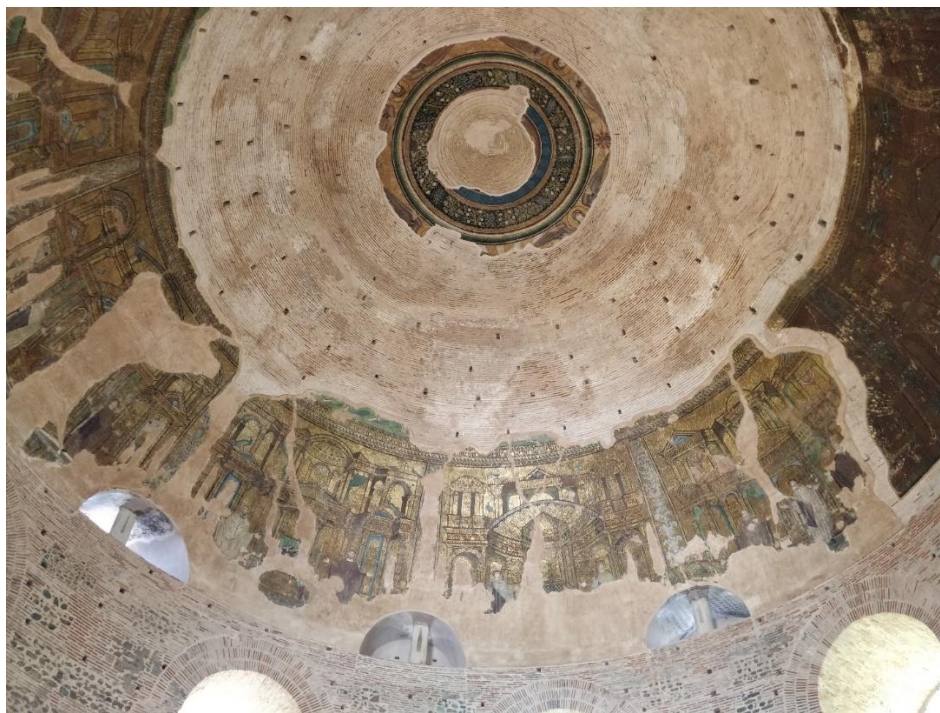


Figure 8: The Rotunda's mosaic program consists of three superimposed areas. The middle zone is mostly gone today (2019).

depicted several figures, thirty or more, which were probably over three meters in height. These figures were perhaps angels, a theory strengthened by the fact that the Rotunda was known as the “Church of the Archangels” in the Byzantine era.⁴⁴

The lower section, about eight meters in height, is in a much better state of preservation compared to the others. The area is divided into eight panels, which depict golden colonnaded structures and two to three figures per panel. Originally, there would have been twenty martyrs depicted in the lower section, but not all the panels have survived. The figures are in a praying position, their hands raised. Their garments, which vary in color and shape, indicate their positions: Soldiers are dressed in a *chlamys* (χλαμύς, a short cloak), and bishops, priests, and laypeople are vested in a *phelonion* (φαιλόνιον, a cloak with a hood, serving as a liturgical vestment in the Orthodox Church, corresponding to the Latin *paenula*). If these figures represent martyrs, then, according to Torp, it is not unreasonable to think that the relics deposited under the Rotunda’s altar and in two crypts outside the building are those of martyrs.⁴⁵

The Rotunda’s mosaics, which displayed Christian symbols and narratives, along with the building’s architectural additions, would have worked together to communicate to the visitor that the Rotunda was a Christian place. Though we know little about who would have used the Rotunda, we can imagine how individuals may have experienced it—through sight (mosaics), smell (incense), taste (communion), sound (singing), touch (kissing of icons)—and how they may have recalled the events and characters important to the Christian tradition. By participating in the church’s rituals, such as attending

⁴⁴ Kiilerich and Torp, *The Rotunda in Thessaloniki and its Mosaics*, 14.

⁴⁵ Torp, “Dogmatic Themes,” 11.

liturgy, Christians may have sensed they were part of a community that had existed for centuries—they, too, were participating in the same acts, thinking the same thoughts, and recalling the same narratives as generations of Christians did before them. In other words, the Rotunda would have been a site for collective remembering—of the Christian events commemorated within its space and architecture and for the community members who formed their own memories of this church.⁴⁶

These collective memories, however, were disrupted when the Rotunda was converted into a mosque, introducing a new layer of the palimpsest. After an eight-year siege on the city, the Ottoman Sultan Murad II and his forces captured Thessaloniki in 1430, taking control from the Venetians. There followed three days of widespread plunder, and several churches, monuments, and other public buildings were destroyed or damaged, though it is unclear what loss the Rotunda suffered during this period.⁴⁷ Thessaloniki would remain a part of the Ottoman Empire for nearly five centuries.

Though a very important city within the Ottoman empire—given its strategic geographical position—Thessaloniki never became an important hub of Islamic piety or learning.⁴⁸ The Muslim population of Thessaloniki was rarely if ever a majority, unlike other cities which the Ottomans occupied in the Balkans, such as Larissa, Monastir,

⁴⁶ Collective memory scholarship reveals the ways in which memories become anchored in physical spaces. Places gain their meanings through narratives and rites that recall the significance of the site, and the people who share in these performances strengthen communal ties. See, for instance: Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

⁴⁷ According to Apostolos E. Vacalopoulos, it was an unwritten custom of war in the East to dedicate three days to pillaging and plundering after capturing a city. A similar situation would present itself a couple decades later at Hagia Sophia, when it was taken over by the Ottoman Empire in 1453. In *A History of Thessaloniki*, trans. Peter Megann (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1973), 94.

⁴⁸ According to Mark Mazower, the city's madrasas were unremarkable and its mosques were nothing compared to the masterpieces found in other Ottoman cities like Constantinople. In *Salonica, City of Ghosts*, 35.

Serres, and Skopje. However, the architectural landscape of the city underwent important changes during its Ottoman period. Soon after the city came under Ottoman control, Thessaloniki's cathedral (which also went by the name Hagia Sophia) was converted into a mosque. The Rotunda appears to have served as the city's cathedral sometime between 1523/24 to 1590/91, when it was converted into the Mosque of Suleyman Hortaji Effendi (named after the head of the nearby Dervish convent, a Muslim religious order). Today, Effendi's marble tomb lies in the burial precinct to the east of the Rotunda's sanctuary, along with the tomb of (possibly) Yusuf Bey, the individual who constructed the former's tomb.⁴⁹ The financial and material means to convert the Rotunda were obtained by Koca Sinan Pasha, the grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire who developed many Muslim institutions and buildings in several Ottoman cities.⁵⁰ The Rotunda's mosaics were probably covered shortly thereafter, although we know they were still visible in 1591, when the Venetian envoy Lorenzo Bernardo saw them as he passed through the city.⁵¹ The ambulatory, which had been previously damaged by an earthquake, was removed and the pierced walls of the niches—which had given access to this ambulatory—were closed.⁵² The site's sacred vessels and icons were transferred to the nearby church of St.

⁴⁹ Pazaras, *The Rotunda of Saint George in Thessaloniki*, 30.

⁵⁰ Grand vizier is a title given to the effective head of government of many sovereign states in the Islamic world.

⁵¹ Lorenzo Bernardo, *Viaggio a Constantinopoli di Sier Lorenzo Bernardo per l'arresto del bailo Sier Girolamo Lippomano cav. 1591 Aprile*, ed. Federico Stefani (Venezia, 1886).

⁵² Penelis and Penelis, *Structural Restoration of Masonry Monuments*, 253.

George (also known as the Church of Agios Georgios),⁵³ the church from which the Rotunda sometimes takes its name today.⁵⁴

Archaeological evidence for and scholarly interpretation of the Rotunda's role as a mosque is scant, as most research has focused on the Roman and Byzantine phases of the building. There are, however, a few architectural clues that speak to the Rotunda's former function as a mosque. A prayer niche, or mihrab, was added to the inside of the Rotunda, and its base can be seen in the altar today. A water fountain, which still stands outside the building's entrance, was added to the site, to be used for *wudu'*, or ablution (Figure 9). The water would allow visitors to wash their bodies—thus entering a state of ritual purity—before entering the Rotunda for prayer. In the doorway above the entrance, there is a long, rectangular plaque with Arabic script, though it is almost imperceivable today due to its state of deterioration and on account of the more colorful and vibrant modern image of St. George placed immediately above it (Figure 10). Finally, a thin minaret, under forty meters in height, was added to the outside of the Rotunda, in the destroyed ambulatory. This feature still stands at the site today, the only surviving minaret in the city. It is one of the few testaments to Thessaloniki's former life as an Ottoman city.

⁵³ Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou and Tourta, *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki*, 68; Pazaras, *The Rotunda of Saint George in Thessaloniki*, 18.

⁵⁴ This name derives from a nearby chapel by the same name (see: Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki," 472). Charles Stewart notes how "St. George, Rotunda" is used by those who support the Rotunda's function as a church today, while those who support the museum or "secular" use of the building simply call it "the Rotunda." In "Who Owns the Rotonda?: Church vs. State in Greece," *Anthropology Today* 14:5 (1998): 6, ft. 3.



Figure 9: Water fountain used for ablution (*wudūʿ*) when the Rotunda served as a mosque (2021).



Figure 10: Arabic script and an icon of St. George above the Rotunda's entrance (2021).

Hagia Sophia and Istanbul

Much like Thessaloniki, Istanbul has a very long, complicated history, one that continues to be revealed as the city undergoes further urban development.⁵⁵ Scholars have traditionally suggested two possibilities regarding the city's establishment. Some suggest it was first established as a port settlement called Lygos by Thracians or Illyrians, Indo-European tribes that inhabited the western Balkan Peninsula alongside Greek communities.⁵⁶ Others claim it was established later by Megarean colonists—Megara being one of four districts in ancient Attica, Greece—in the seventh century BCE, then called Byzantium (or Byzantion, from the Greek Βυζάντιον).⁵⁷

Christian tradition has it that one of Jesus' apostles, Andrew, established Byzantium as an apostolic see (a bishopric) in 38 CE. According to this tradition, the see developed into the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the mid-fifth century, an institution that remains to this day.⁵⁸ After taking the wrong side in a civil war, Byzantium was

⁵⁵ Urban development in Istanbul, and in Turkey more broadly, has generated important archaeological discoveries. The construction of the Yenikapı metro station and the Marmaray tunnel in 2008, for instance, uncovered evidence suggesting that humans have lived in the area since at least 6700 BCE. In 2013, during the construction of a housing project in Nevşehir Province (where the Cappadocia region is located), a 5,000-year-old subterranean metropolis was discovered, where artifacts therein suggested the city was in use during the Byzantine era and through the Ottoman period. The discovery put the urban development project on hold indefinitely. In Jennifer Pinkowski, "Massive Underground City Found in Cappadocia Region of Turkey," *National Geographic*, 26 March 2015. [Online](#).

⁵⁶ Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, 4.18.

⁵⁷ The name Byzantium is likely Thracian or Illyrian in origin. Thomas Russell explains how the addition of a suffix to the Βυζ- stem provides a common root for a number of Thracian or Illyrian names, such as Beuzas, Busa, etc. Some traditions claim that Byzantium was established by a King Bizas/Byzas, leader of the Megarean colonists, hence the city's name. However, Russell explains it was the other way around: "the name of the eponymous founder comes from the city itself, rather than vice versa." In *Byzantium and the Bosphorus: A Historical Study, from the Seventh Century BC until the Foundation of Constantinople* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 235.

⁵⁸ J. Gordon Melton (ed.), *Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, and Spiritual Commemorations* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 35.

besieged and destroyed by Roman Emperor Septimius Severus in 196 CE and subsequently rebuilt and temporarily renamed as Augusta Antonina, in honor of the emperor's son. Severus gave the city its first, though unfinished, hippodrome and built new public baths.

In the fourth century, Byzantium was made into the new eastern capital of the Roman Empire by Emperor Constantine, thus shifting Roman power eastward, away from Rome, and geographically closer to the center of the empire. The city underwent a significant building program and was renamed New Rome (Νέα Ῥώμη), though it was popularly known as Constantinople (Κωνσταντινούπολις, the "City of Constantine") and would continue to be known as such throughout the Byzantine Empire and beyond.⁵⁹ It was within this remade city that Hagia Sophia was built and became an important center for the Byzantine Church.

Some sources claim that Hagia Sophia is located on what used to be "a pagan temple."⁶⁰ Indeed, this was a narrative presented by Turkish guides on my research visits

⁵⁹ I will refer to the city as Constantinople for the rest of this chapter, whereas subsequent chapters (which predominantly focus on the twentieth century onwards, when the city was made a part of the Republic of Turkey) will adopt the name Istanbul. Even today, however, many Greeks continue to refer to the city as Constantinople, despite the official name change when Istanbul became a part of the newly-formed Republic of Turkey. The refusal by some to call the city Istanbul has made its way into pop culture, with a couple of hit songs making humorous references to the issue, including "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)," performed by The Four Lads in 1953 and covered by They Might Be Giants in 1989.

⁶⁰ Bigelow, "Hagia Sophia's Tears and Smiles," 113. However, Bigelow provides no evidence for this claim. In another volume, Alexandros K. Kyrou simply refers to "early accounts" that make this claim, without actually identifying them. In "Greece," in *Eastern Europe: An Introduction to the Peoples, Lands, and Culture. Volume 3: Southeastern Europe*, ed. Richard Frucht (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 853.

to the site.⁶¹ This possibility is difficult to ascertain as archaeological evidence is scant.⁶² If this unsubstantiated claim were to be accurate, however, then the construction of Hagia Sophia would fall in line with a broader trend in late antiquity of constructing churches over buildings already associated with cultic practices or adapting them for Christian use.⁶³

The physical building that stands today is not the original church of Hagia Sophia. Two versions predated it. According to the seventh-century *Easter Chronicle* (*Chronicon Paschale*), a building known as the Great Church (Μεγάλη Εκκλησία) was inaugurated on the current site of Hagia Sophia in 360 by Euxodius, the bishop of Constantinople, during the reign of Emperor Constantius II. Some sources, like the sixth-century chronicler Hesychius of Miletus, attribute the church, or at least its foundation, to Emperor Constantine, although scholars have argued that this connection seems

⁶¹ During my guided tours, I was told that the building was constructed over a Roman temple dedicated to Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, which is how Hagia Sophia received its name (“Holy Wisdom”). Many Turkish tourism websites also make this claim about Hagia Sophia, referencing the following unsourced website: <https://hagiasophiatrueky.com/history-hagia-sophia/>. It claims to be managed by the Hagia Sophia Research Team.

⁶² The sixth-century historian Procopius, who gives a detailed description of Hagia Sophia, makes no mention of temple foundations. This may suggest that there were no such foundations or, if there were, Procopius did not feel they were important to mention, or even intentionally left these details out of his account if he wished to dissociate the site from “pagan” cult practices.

⁶³ Some scholars posit three phases in the adaptive reuse or conversion of temples: “In the fourth century, profane, private buildings were reused for liturgical use; in the fifth century, public buildings were reutilized; in the sixth, pagan temples and shrines were converted into churches.” In Ivan Basić, “Pagan Tomb to Christian Church: The Case of Diocletian’s Mausoleum in Spalatum,” in *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire: New Evidence, New Approaches (4th–8th Centuries)*, ed. Marianne Sághy and Edward M. Schoolman (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 245.

This reuse of cultic spaces was explicitly recommended by some late antique Christian leaders. For instance, the sixth-century bishop of Rome, Gregory the Great, states in a letter to Mellitus (a monastic leader sent on a conversion mission to England) that local shrines should be transformed into Christian churches rather than be demolished (*Epistle* 11.56, according to the numbering system introduced by Dag Ludvig Norberg in the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* series). For examples of churches built over temples, see: Penelope J. Goodman, “Temples in Late Antique Gaul,” in *The Archaeology of Late Antique ‘Paganism’*, ed. Luke Lavan and Michael Mulryan (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 181, ft. 98.

unlikely.⁶⁴ This building suffered two devastating fires. The first fire, which partially burned down the church in 404, was the result of riots following the exile of John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople.⁶⁵ The Great Church was destroyed and a second church was inaugurated on the site by Emperor Theodosius II in 415. Not too long after, around the year 430, the church came to be known as Hagia Sophia.⁶⁶

The second fire occurred in 532, following the Nika Riots.⁶⁷ This time the building was almost entirely burnt down.⁶⁸ Emperor Justinian commissioned the building of a new church soon thereafter. This is the building that exists today. Justinian employed two engineers—the geometer and architect Anthemius of Tralles and the renowned

⁶⁴ See: Jonathan Bardill, *Brickstamps of Constantinople* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); W.R. Lethaby and H. Swainson, *The Church of Sancta Sophia, Constantinople: A Study of Byzantine Building* (London and New York: MacMillan & Co., 1894).

⁶⁵ John Chrysostom was well known for his impressive oratory skills (hence his name Χρυσόστομος or “golden mouth”). He did not shy away from denouncing abuses of authority committed by imperial and ecclesiastical leaders alike. This critical stance may have landed him in trouble on a number of occasions, and in 404, residents of Constantinople protested the archbishop’s exile, and in turn resulting in the partial destruction of the Great Church. See: Brian Croke, *Flashpoint Hagia Sophia* (Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁶⁶ Emma Wegner, “Hagia Sophia, 532–37,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, October 2004. [Online](#).

⁶⁷ Emperor Justinian I and his leading ministers were very unpopular on account of the high taxes they levied, and there were also accusations of corruption and even cruelty by the ministers. The public’s frustration boiled over on 1 January 532, when supporters of the Blues and the Greens—rival chariot teams that competed in Constantinople’s hippodrome—joined forces to revolt against imperial authority. During that day’s races, supporters taunted and insulted Emperor Justinian, who presided over the races from his seat in the imperial palace. Instead of chanting their support for the Blues or Greens, supporters now chanted “Νίκα” (Greek for “win” or “victory,” hence the name “Nika Riots”). After imperial forces attempted to arrest some participants, a riot broke out, which would rage for days and ended in the massacre of approximately 30,000 people. As a result, Constantinople was engulfed in fire, the palace was sieged, and much of the city was destroyed, including the senate house, numerous private residences, and Hagia Sophia. See: Croke, *Flashpoint Hagia Sophia*.

⁶⁸ Marble blocks from this second church survive today, now residing in an excavation pit next to Hagia Sophia’s entrance. More recent surveys by Ken Dark and Jan Kostenec have revealed that some remains from the older church structure were incorporated into the newly designed Hagia Sophia. See: *Hagia Sophia in Context: An Archaeological Re-examination of the Cathedral of Byzantine Constantinople* (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxford University Press, 2019).

scientist and mathematician Isidore of Miletos—to construct an even bigger church with a dome that would come to be the defining symbol the building, even today. Thus, a third version of the church was inaugurated, this time as an entirely different basilica. It was an ambitious building project, ultimately completed in less than six years. The new Hagia Sophia was consecrated on 27 December 537, sanctified by Patriarch Menas of Constantinople.⁶⁹

The church was touted for the uniqueness of its structure, its colored columns, and its impressive lighting, among many other distinct architectural features.⁷⁰ Comparing the Theodosian church to Justinian’s Hagia Sophia, the sixth-century court historian Procopius writes:

But the Emperor Justinian built not long afterwards a church so finely shaped, that if anyone had enquired of the Christians before the burning if it would be their wish that the church should be destroyed and one like this should take its place, shewing them some sort of model of the building we now see, it seems to me that they would have prayed that they might see their church destroyed forthwith, in order that the building might be converted into its present form.⁷¹

Emperor Justinian and his builders adopted an aniconic mosaic program, where ornamental decoration and a cross adorned Hagia Sophia.⁷² Some of the church’s

⁶⁹ See: Michael Maas (ed.), *The Justinian Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷⁰ See, for instance, the writings of Paul the Silentiary, a sixth-century Greek poet who was part of Justinian’s court. In *Three Political Voices from the Age of Justinian: Agapetus, ‘Advice to the Emperor’; Dialogue on Political Science; Paul the Silentiary, ‘Description of Hagia Sophia’*, trans. Peter N. Bell (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).

⁷¹ Procopius, *On Buildings. General Index*, I.1.22, trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Loeb Classical Library 343 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940).

⁷² When the building was consecrated in 537, the only figural decoration on its walls were four great seraphim (angelic beings), which today surround the ninth-century Pantocrator mosaic (i.e., depiction of Christ as ruler of the universe) in the central dome. Prior to this mosaic, however, the central dome was decorated with a huge cross in a medallion. It may have been the case that Justinian did not add any mosaics in order to respect the wishes of his wife, and others who were opposed to the veneration of human images. In Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (Princeton: Princeton

monolithic columns were taken from the ruins of the famed Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.⁷³ Over time, Hagia Sophia also collected an arsenal of sacred relics associated with biblical figures. It purported to have Christ's tunic, crown of thorns, and blood, as well as pieces of the cross on which he was crucified and the lance that pierced his side; the ram's horns used by Joshua to blow down the walls of Jericho; and the olive branch carried by a dove to Noah's ark after the flood that inundated the world, among other material remains.⁷⁴ These relics served multiple functions, acting as media for contact with the divine and magnets for pilgrimage.⁷⁵

The church underwent many architectural and iconographic modifications over the next centuries, on account of various earthquakes and fires that damaged the building, as well as the impact of the iconoclastic debates of the eighth and ninth centuries.⁷⁶

University Press, 2009), 51. There are many studies dedicated to Hagia Sophia's mosaics. For a history of this scholarship, see: Natalia B. Teteriatnikov, *Justinianic Mosaics of Hagia Sophia and Their Aftermath* (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2017), 13–26.

⁷³ The adaptive reuse of materials from older monuments—resources known as *spolia*—was common practice in late antiquity (see ft. 63 in this chapter for a discussion of the adaptive reuse of entire buildings). Indeed, late antique legislation demonstrates a concern with regulating this reuse (Joseph Alchermes, “*Spolia* in Roman Cities of the Late Empire: Legislative Rationales and Architectural Reuse,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 48 [1994]: 178). As the Roman Empire became Christianized, materials from traditional temples were increasingly used in the construction of Christian buildings. This reuse, according to Helen Saradi, “was often a means to convey a specific political message, such as the appropriation of the Roman past and the legitimacy of the new empire” (“The Use of Ancient *Spolia* in Byzantine Monuments: The Archaeological and Literary Evidence,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 3:4 [1997]: 395). The supremacy of Christianity was physically anchored in the city's urban landscape: “Such architectural recycling furnished a means of maintaining the luster of the late imperial city's heritage in the physical record of its dismantled and recomposed monuments” (Alchermes, “*Spolia* in Roman Cities,” 171). Of course, the reuse of materials was also more economic and convenient (Saradi, “The Use of Ancient *Spolia*,” 397).

⁷⁴ Bordewich, “A Monumental Struggle.”

⁷⁵ Annemarie Weyl Carr, “Icons and the Object of Pilgrimage in Middle Byzantine Constantinople,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002): 84.

⁷⁶ Sometimes periodized as the First Iconoclasm (726–787) and the Second Iconoclasm (814–842), these events refer to the prohibition of image veneration by Byzantine imperial authorities and the subsequent

Subsequent to these debates, several mosaics were designed inside Hagia Sophia throughout the medieval period (Figure 11). For instance, a ninth-century mosaic in the apse of the altar depicts the Virgin Mary dressed in a *maphorion* (μαφόριον, a garment covering the head and shoulders), with Christ Child on her lap and her right hand on his shoulder. Another mosaic depicting the Virgin with Christ, this time flanked by two male figures, is a tenth-century product, located above the door of the southwest vestibule. The male figures are Emperor Constantine, who presents a model of the city of Constantinople, and Emperor Justinian, who offers a miniature version of Hagia Sophia. The building's mosaics, as I discuss later in this project, would become a sticking point in the conflicts over Hagia Sophia's reconversion into a mosque in July 2020. What would happen to these figurative mosaics—perceived as great masterpieces of Byzantine Christian art—within an aniconic tradition?⁷⁷

violent removal of religious images and statues. Motivated by the Old Testament's commandment forbidding the making and worshipping of "graven images" (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8), Emperor Leo III began emptying Constantinople's churches of their icons in 726, and without consulting with other leaders or holding a church council on the matter, he decreed a total ban on religious images in 730. Imperial troops destroyed every icon they could find across the city. Emperor Leo's decree was repealed under Empress Irene in 787 at the Second Council of Nicaea.

The practice of breaking icons, however, would continue sporadically over the next decades. Emperor Leo V is associated with the second major period of iconoclasm, when its revival was made official by a synod held in Hagia Sophia. The Byzantine iconoclastic period was only deemed truly over when Empress Theodora proclaimed the restoration of icons in 843, an event still commemorated in the Orthodox tradition as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Following Theodora's proclamation, artists were quickly commissioned and Hagia Sophia became populated with figurative mosaics. See: Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁷⁷ Aniconism refers to the opposition to or absence of visual representations (icons) within a religious or cultural tradition. It is typically associated with the monotheistic Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), where their holy texts directly link the creation of images to idolatry. In European and American popular culture and media outlets, Islam is oftentimes characterized as an iconoclastic religion at odds with modernity. To make this argument, critics reference the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001 and Islamic State's partial destruction of Palmyra in Syria in 2015, among other examples. For a more nuanced study of the supposed "monolithic and pathologically Muslim response to the image," see: Finbarr Barry Flood, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *The Art Bulletin* 84:4 (2002): 641–659.



Figure 11: Thirteenth-century depiction of Christ, part the Deësis mosaic in Hagia Sophia's south gallery (2018).



Figure 12: View of the dome from inside Hagia Sophia (2021).

Other architectural features of Hagia Sophia have been continuous. The dome, mentioned earlier, is one of its most impressive features (Figure 12). It was an architectural feat for its time, unrivaled by any other structure built over the next millennium. Thirty-one meters in diameter, it stands at a height of fifty-five meters from the base of the building. Forty windows pierce the dome, allowing the sun to filter into the space. Four acres of golden tesserae, or glass cubes, are described as studding “the interior to form a glittering canopy overhead, each one set at a subtly different angle to reflect the flicker of candles and oil lamps that illuminated nocturnal ceremonies.”⁷⁸ Those who visited Hagia Sophia were so impressed by this dome that they believed divine intervention was at work. Procopius, who was likely a participant at the original consecration of the building in 537, marveled at Hagia Sophia’s dome, describing it as a structure that seemingly floated, writing that it “does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from heaven by the fabled golden chain.”⁷⁹ Despite a few structural hiccups, the dome was (and remains) an architectural masterpiece.⁸⁰ It continues to be admired by thousands of visitors today.

⁷⁸ Bordewich, “A Monumental Struggle.”

⁷⁹ Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, in *The Church of St. Sophia Constantinople*, trans. W. Lethaby and H. Swainson (New York: 1894).

⁸⁰ For instance, approximately twenty years after Hagia Sophia was rebuilt, the magnificent dome already started to crack. In January 558, a terrible earthquake hit the city, which caused further damage to the dome. As workers were repairing the dome some six months later, the eastern section caved in and crashed down. The emperor invited a new architect, Isidore the Younger, to repair and strengthen the dome. He was the nephew of Hagia Sophia’s previous architect, Isidore of Miletos. The nephew secured the dome by making it both more narrow and slightly higher. He also added buttresses to the exterior. The dome was redecorated again with golden tesserae and a monumental cross. On 24 December 562, twenty-five years after Hagia Sophia was first consecrated, the church was reconsecrated a second time. In Herrin, *Byzantium*, 57.

Conserving the dome is a major contemporary concern, and experts worry about its ability to withstand future earthquakes.⁸¹

Constantinople was the capital of the Byzantine Empire for centuries, and Hagia Sophia stood as its crowning jewel. The church and the city suffered many attacks and sieges, both from eastern and western enemies, and from Christian and Muslim opponents. For instance, one of the most devastating sieges of the city was its capture and occupation by Latin crusaders in the thirteenth century. In 1204, these western Christians seized and pillaged Constantinople on their way to Jerusalem during the Fourth Crusade. Churches were desecrated, icons burned, libraries and archives—rich with vestiges of classical antiquity—destroyed, and relics stolen. Writing not long after the events, the Byzantine historian Nicetas Choniates recounts the plundering of the city in dramatic detail:

How shall I begin to tell of the deeds wrought by these nefarious men! Alas, the images, which ought to have been adored, were trodden under foot! Alas, the relics of the holy martyrs were thrown into unclean places! Then was seen what one shudders to hear, namely, the divine body and blood of Christ was spilled upon the ground or thrown about. They snatched the precious reliquaries, thrust into their bosoms the ornaments which these contained, and used the broken remnants for pans and drinking cups, precursors of Anti-Christ, authors and heralds of his nefarious deeds which we momentarily expect. Manifestly, indeed, by that race then, just as formerly, Christ was robbed and insulted and His garments were divided by lot; only one thing was lacking, that His side, pierced by a spear, should pour rivers of divine blood on the ground.⁸²

Nicetas continues to relate that Hagia Sophia itself suffered along with the rest of the city:

⁸¹ “Hagia Sophia - Istanbul’s Ancient Mystery,” *Building Wonders* (PBS, 2015).

⁸² Nicetas Choniates, *The Sack of Constantinople (1204)*, trans. D. C. Munro, *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Series 1, Vol. 3:1, Rev. Ed. (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1912), 15. [Online](#).

Nor can the violation of the Great Church [Hagia Sophia] be listened to with equanimity. For the sacred altar, formed of all kinds of precious materials and admired by the whole world, was broken into bits and distributed among the soldiers, as was all the other sacred wealth of so great and infinite splendor.⁸³

Venetians made off with most of the plunder with the result that much of the city's religious and cultural artifacts were transplanted to western Europe.⁸⁴ Byzantine Christians reclaimed the city after 1260, though it never fully recovered from this Latin pillage and occupation.⁸⁵

Less than two centuries after the end of the Latin occupation of Constantinople, the city would again fall into the hands of foreign invaders. In 1453, following an eight-week siege, Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II and his troops invaded the city, whereafter Constantinople was made the new capital of the Ottoman Empire.⁸⁶ This act, along with the death of the last Byzantine emperor, traditionally marks the end of the Byzantine Empire.⁸⁷ Mehmed, viewed by Christian writers in the aftermath as a "new Caligula" or

⁸³ Nicetas Choniates, *The Sack of Constantinople (1204)*, 15.

⁸⁴ Herrin, *Byzantium*, 267.

⁸⁵ The violence of this occupation has been an important point of contention between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian Churches, so much so that Pope John Paul II, speaking 800 years after the events, expressed his regret in 2001 over the Crusaders' actions, stating: "For the occasions past and present, when sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have sinned by action or omission against their Orthodox brothers and sisters, may the Lord grant us the forgiveness we beg of him." Quoted in Alessandra Stanley, "In Athens, Pope Seeks to Mend an Ancient Rife," *The New York Times*, 5 May 2001. [Online](#).

⁸⁶ According to Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, this conquest was for economic and strategic purposes. Constantinople is located at the "throat" between the Black and Mediterranean seas and between the European and Asian continents, on "an active trade artery." In *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12, 13.

⁸⁷ See, for instance: Jonathan Harris, *The End of Byzantium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); David Nicolle, *Constantinople 1453: The End of Byzantium* (Oxford: Osprey, 2000); Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

“crueller [*sic*] than Nero”—two infamous Roman emperors—was described as wrenching out “one of the two eyes of the church.”⁸⁸

Christians, Muslims, and Jews from Anatolia migrated to the city, bringing their religious and cultural traditions, customs, and objects with them, making Constantinople a very cosmopolitan place. Aiming to make the new capital a prosperous city, the sultan ordered the repair of the city’s walls and the construction of a new palace, mosques, and madrasas. Constantinople quickly became a symbol of Islamic culture, to a far greater degree than occurred with Ottoman Thessaloniki.

When Mehmed invaded Constantinople, Hagia Sophia was immediately converted into a mosque, a *fait accompli* after an ‘*ulamā*’ (Islamic scholar) recited the *shahāda* in the space.⁸⁹ Gradual changes were made to the site over the next decades and ensuing centuries that reflected its new identity and function. Indeed, site conversion brought both destruction and preservation—and sometimes both at the same time, as seen with the plastered Christian mosaics that were later revealed in the twentieth century. Christian iconography in Hagia Sophia was destroyed, modified,⁹⁰ or covered over the years, with some images remaining visible to visitors for decades or even centuries after

⁸⁸ Descriptions offered by Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Niccolo Tignosi, among others. Quoted in Boyar and Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul*, 6.

⁸⁹ The *shahāda* refers to the statement, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet.”

⁹⁰ Crosses on doors, for instance, were reshaped to make arrows (Figure 13).

Hagia Sophia's conversion.⁹¹ Meanwhile, relics, bells, and the iconostasis⁹² were destroyed. Architectural features typically found in mosques were added to the building, such as a mihrab and a minbar. A total of four minarets were constructed outside the building, a number reserved for imperial mosques.⁹³ These features still remain at the site today.



Figure 13: Crosses were adapted into arrows when Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque (2018).

⁹¹ For instance, the ninth-century mosaic depicting the Virgin and Child was not plastered over until the mid-eighteenth century. This means it was visible to visitors for over 300 years after the Ottomans converted the building in the fifteenth century. Likewise, the Pantocrator mosaic in Hagia Sophia's dome was also visible long after the building was made into a mosque. Paul of Aleppo describes the mosaic in his diary in 1652 (see: Teteriatnikov, *Justinian Mosaics of Hagia Sophia*, 34). Nuh Yılmaz writes: "In reflecting diverse approaches toward imagery, the Hagia Sophia is a living critique of the belief that Islam invariably takes an essentialist approach to figurative imagery." In "Hagia Sophia," in *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Alan Masters (New York: Facts On File, 2009), 245.

⁹² An iconostasis is a large screen (usually adorned with many religious icons) that shields the chancel (the area where the clergy perform the Eucharistic ritual) from the view of the lay congregation gathered in the nave.

⁹³ Madden, *Istanbul*, 281.

The minarets would have enabled the *adhān*, the Islamic call to prayer, to take place at Hagia Sophia. In imagining the use of this site as a mosque, the *adhān* is a productive place to anchor this discussion, because of its strong association with the Muslim community as “one of the most instantly recognizable Islamic sounds.”⁹⁴ The *adhān*, a text declaring God as uniquely worthy of worship, is recited by a *muezzin* from a minaret every day at five prescribed times. The aim of this call is to summon Muslims for their obligatory prayer, known as *ṣalāt*. Simultaneously, the *adhān* signals a Muslim space. It invests time and space with meaning, by distinguishing the sacred from the profane, and by turning Muslims away from the everyday toward their relationship with God.⁹⁵ Much like bells at churches signal a Christian presence, the *adhān* indicates the presence of a Muslim religious community.⁹⁶

The sense of sound is pervasive in a way that other senses are not. It is difficult to avoid, unlike the sense of sight, from which one can turn away, or the senses of taste and touch, which one can decide not to activate. Sound, as Isaac Weiner convincingly demonstrates in his book *Religion Out Loud*, can seep through an urban landscape, “spilling over and across imagined boundaries between public and private, between self and other, and among discrete religious communities in ways that have often felt uncontrollable and uncontainable.”⁹⁷ Indeed, when bodies and buildings are compressed

⁹⁴ Lutfi Othman, “The Relationality of the Adhaan: A Reading of the Islamic Call to Prayer Through Adriana Cavarero’s Philosophy of Vocal Expression,” *Journal of Sonic Studies* 15 (2017). [Online](#).

⁹⁵ Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 163.

⁹⁶ Othman, “The Relationality of the Adhaan.”

⁹⁷ Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, 2.

against each other in smaller quarters—as they would have been in Constantinople—sounds are nearly impossible to avoid. The sound of the *adhān*, which was likely an unknown sound to the ears of the city’s residents before the fifteenth century, would have signaled and reminded them daily of a Muslim presence. Given that Muslims were rarely permitted to broadcast the *adhān* in areas under Christian control, its sound likely signaled Islamic *rule*. This would have been all the more perceptible after church bells were prohibited in Constantinople (following Mehmed’s conquest of the city), given the similar role of bells in structuring the daily life of Christians.⁹⁸

For Muslims, on the other hand, the *adhān* reinforced a distinct communal identity. According to ethnomusicologist Lutfi Othman, its sound established “the precise moments in which the communal uniqueness [was] to be performed.”⁹⁹ The *adhān* projected from Hagia Sophia’s minarets created a distinction in time and space for Muslims, inviting them to turn away from their mundane affairs for a set time in order to engage in “the otherworldliness of prayer.”¹⁰⁰ The sight of towering minarets peppered throughout the urban landscape of Constantinople could have further reaffirmed this distinction. These minarets may have served as physical landmarks to signify “the sacred center of the local Islamic community,”¹⁰¹ and the sound projected from them meant that the Muslim community was demarcated along acoustic lines. Thus, with a change in

⁹⁸ Andreas Lyberatos, “Time and Timekeeping in the Balkans: Representations and Realities,” in *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Four: Concepts, Approaches, and (Self-)Representations*, ed. Rumen Daskalov et al. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 270.

⁹⁹ Othman, “The Relationality of the Adhaan.”

¹⁰⁰ Othman, “The Relationality of the Adhaan.”

¹⁰¹ Tong Soon Lee, “Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore,” *Ethnomusicology* 43:1 (1999): 87.

religious political authorities also came a shift in religious soundscapes at Hagia Sophia and in Constantinople—as would have also been the case at the Rotunda and in Thessaloniki.

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia have undergone multiple transformations over their complex lives. They demonstrate how *space* (the building and its environment) can be adapted—architecturally, ritualistically, conceptually—to become a new *place*, embodying new meanings, filled with new memories, and affecting people in exclusionary and inclusionary ways. Though these two sites experienced different types of religious visitors over the centuries, they nevertheless remained sacred. Or, perhaps put more accurately, they were re-sacralized, such as through specific speech acts like the recitation of the *shahāda*.¹⁰² This sacredness would be challenged in the twentieth century when the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia were made into museums and monuments—the topic of the next chapter—and with this new status, these palimpsests gained another layer of meaning, identity, and memory.

¹⁰² For a discussion on the efficacious function of speech acts, see: J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1962]).

Chapter 2: Heritage-Making Practices and the Materialization of Secularization

*“Greece is a landscape whose meaning is often in its ruins.”*¹

In 1913, in the midst of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the city of Thessaloniki—which had been under Ottoman rule since 1430—was incorporated into the Greek state, becoming the capital of the Macedonian region. A decade later, Thessaloniki’s neighbor to the east, the city of Istanbul, became the capital of the newly established Republic of Turkey, after two rapid shifts in governance. The first was the removal of the Ottoman sultanate (in existence since 1299) by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 1 November 1922, a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War. The second was Turkish independence, gained when proxies of the Allies—who had occupied and partitioned the remains of the Ottoman Empire following its defeat—left the region after the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923). Thessaloniki and Istanbul thus each achieved a new national status within close proximity to one another, after having been both a part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries.

Together, Chapters 2 and 3 ask what happens to urban landscapes and religious sites when they are incorporated into new national borders. Chapter 2 examines state-sanctioned preservation and development measures carried out in Thessaloniki and Istanbul, with the aim of addressing which areas of these cities—and which layers of their palimpsestic pasts—were identified as historically important. That is, I am interested in *where* heritage was located, with an eye towards how memorials to the past were marked out. The master plans by architects and urban planners Ernest Hébrard and

¹ Effie-Fotini Athanassopoulos, “An ‘Ancient’ Landscape: European Ideals, Archaeology, and Nation Building in Early Modern Greece,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20:2 (2002): 276.

Henri Prost carved out historical quarters in Thessaloniki and Istanbul, respectively— areas that largely match up with the most frequented tourist destinations in the cities today and which make up part of their UNESCO World Heritage sites. Hébrard and Prost selected other areas for redevelopment, in turn significantly restructuring these two cities away from the more complex, multicultural urban landscape of the Ottoman Empire to a more sanitized, homogenous city layout that mimicked that of other European cities. As this chapter reveals, ancient and Byzantine religious sites were central orientation markers in the cities’ development plans.

The transformations undergone by Thessaloniki and Istanbul hinged, in part, on secularizing certain buildings and open spaces, thus changing how residents interacted with religious sites and in public forums. Chapter 2 focuses on shifts at the city level whereas Chapter 3 examines the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia’s transformations into museums and monuments, where their layered religious histories were acknowledged but their religious use suppressed. The sites remained sacred places but a sacredness derived from their *historical* importance rather than through their religious usage. In other words, with a new national status came a “secular sacralization of cultural goods.”² These transformations at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century would have lasting impacts on the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, and on Thessaloniki and Istanbul more broadly, and they would sow the seeds for the conflicts discussed in Part II of this project.

² Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales, “Introduction,” in *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation, and Christianity*, ed. Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 3.

Thessaloniki (and the Rotunda)

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Thessaloniki would arguably become the Ottoman Empire's most modern city.³ Sections of the historic eastern and western walls, as well as the seawall and waterfront fortifications, were demolished, the quay was opened up, and two new railroad lines were created. These interventions permitted Thessaloniki's connection to harbors and railway stations in Europe, enabling the city to maintain its traditional role as a transport trade hub between the Ottoman Empire and Europe, as it had done since antiquity.

Indeed, the nineteenth century was a remarkably transformative period for the whole of the Ottoman Empire. The empire, which had significantly weakened over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, was known as the "Sick Man of Europe" by the mid-nineteenth century. In response, Ottoman leaders implemented the Tanzimat Reforms,⁴ measures aimed at modernizing the empire in order to reverse its decline in power. These reforms—which affected the economic, educational, legal, and political spheres—began in the 1830s and ended in the 1870s, with the adoption of the first-ever Ottoman Constitution of 1876. In an attempt to compete with western European powers, the Ottoman state, for instance, secularized schools, created universities based on the European model, recentralized government structures, restricted the power of the sultan,

³ In 1912, when Thessaloniki was annexed by Greece, the city was touted as "the most modern city in the Ottoman Empire." Quoted in Alexandra Yerolympos, "Thessaloniki Before and After Ernest Hébrard," May 2007 (unpublished paper), 6.

⁴ The first period of the Tanzimat Reforms was between 1839 and 1856, under Sultan Abdulmecit I, who attempted to better integrate non-Muslims and non-Turks into Ottoman society, and the second period was between 1856 and 1876, under Sultan Abdulaziz, who was the first Ottoman Sultan to travel to western Europe.

and introduced a new tax system.⁵ The Tanzimat Reforms also sought to transform the Ottoman Empire's residents (Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike) into citizens by providing them equal rights to property and education.⁶

However, these reforms could not keep up with the development seen in other European states. Though they resulted in an increased centralization of the Ottoman Empire's power, the empire nevertheless continued to weaken. When war broke out in Thessaloniki and the wider region during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, the Ottomans could not prevent the massive political and national changes that would occur in this territory with the turn of the twentieth century.

Simultaneously, a Greek nationalist movement was brewing, one that would have significant consequences for Thessaloniki by the start of the twentieth century. Inspired by the French Revolution and the revolutionary fervor that spread across Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁷ nationalists,⁸ many of whom were Orthodox

⁵ See: Donald Quataert, "The Age of Reforms, 1812–1914," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914*, ed. Halil İnalcik and Donald Quataert (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 759–776.

⁶ Devin E. Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2016), 19–20.

⁷ Some scholars posit a stronger connection between the Greek revolution and tsarist Russia, linked by a shared sense of Orthodox and Byzantine culture and history, as well as a desire to stamp out Ottoman rule and take back Constantinople. Theophilus C. Prousis writes: "Russia's frequent wars against the Ottoman Empire (1711, 1737–39, 1768–74, 1787–92, 1806–12) not only accelerated the empire's decline but also contributed to Greek resistance to the Ottomans." In "The Greeks of Russia and the Greek Awakening, 1774–1821," *Balkan Studies* 28:2 (1987): 263.

⁸ At the heart of this revolution was the secret organization known as the *Philiki Etaireia* ("Society of Friends"), formed in Odessa, Ukraine in 1814 by three Greek expatriates. The organization's membership swelled in number preceding the war of independence, so much so that a contemporary witness commented "it came to indoctrinate even the swineherds" (quoted in Marios Hatzopoulos, "From Resurrection to Insurrection: 'Sacred' Myths, Motifs, and Symbols in the Greek War of Independence," in *The Making of Modern Greece: Nationalism, Romanticism, and the Uses of the Past (1797–1896)*, ed. Roderick Beaton and David Ricks [Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009], 82). The organization adopted initiation rituals that were religious in nature, "whereby new recruits were sworn in before candles, Orthodox icons, and the Gospel" (Lucien Frary, "The Orthodox Church," in *The Greek Revolution: A*

clergymen,⁹ successfully waged war against Ottoman forces in the 1820s, during the Greek War of Independence.¹⁰ Because much of western Europe grounded its classical heritage in a Greco-Roman past, there was much sympathy—as well as military and financial support—for this revolutionary cause.¹¹ Moreover, the spirit of Classical Greece permeated Greek national rhetoric, and especially from the 1850s onwards, the legacy of Byzantine Greece did so as well. The two helped create a shared sense of national identity.¹² This identity was built on several foundations, including the endorsement and use of the Greek language and a religious, or even ethnic, identification with Orthodox Christianity.¹³

Critical Dictionary, ed. Paschalis M. Kitromilides and Constantinos Tsoukalas [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021], 486).

⁹ Religious leaders were at the center of the Greek revolution in multifaceted ways, with some physically participating in the fighting from the onset. However, not all Greek Orthodox clergymen supported the movement—or could not—with leaders like the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Gregory V condemning it. Gregory was unable to suppress the revolution, to the frustration of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II. The Patriarch was executed as a result. This act became a turning point for the movement, as it helped unite European leaders against the sultan. See: Frary, “The Orthodox Church,” 488. Gregory is today commemorated as an *Ethnomartyr* in the Greek Church, an Orthodox Christian who died on behalf of Christianity and the Greek nation.

¹⁰ Greece was recognized as an independent state in 1830, and its borders were defined in 1832. As Greece’s annexation of Thessaloniki demonstrates, these borders continued to expand over the centuries.

¹¹ This was particularly the case with the British Empire, whose interest in Greece’s independence seemed more informed by British society’s sense of civilizational debt to ancient Greece than any interest in the current realities of nineteenth-century Greece. British support came in various forms. It included military backing, with Brits such as the Romantic poet Lord Byron taking it upon themselves to physically join the cause, and financial support, through two major loans in 1824 and 1825 (see: Maria Christina Chatziioannou, “War, Crisis and Sovereign Loans: The Greek War of Independence and British Economic Expansion in the 1820s,” *The Historical Review / La revue historique* 10 [2013]: 33–55). Furthermore, the Treaty of Constantinople, which defined Greece’s territorial borders, was ratified at the London Conference of 1832.

¹² See: Sofia Voutsaki, “Introduction: Ancient Monuments and Modern Identities,” in *Ancient Monuments and Modern Identities: A Critical History of Archaeology in 19th and 20th Century Greece*, ed. Paul Cartledge and Sofia Voutsaki (Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–23. Oftentimes other European nations placed a greater importance on ancient Greek heritage than did modern Greeks, who, as Orthodox Christians, identified more closely with their Byzantine religious heritage.

¹³ Though Greeks may have been trying to construct a national identity through various means, including archaeological remains and other references to the past, this identity was very much one in the making

Much of the national rhetoric centered on Greece's once-glorious religious past.¹⁴ For instance, many Greeks demonstrated a strong desire to revive the former Byzantine Empire, with Constantinople as its capital. Historiographies produced around this time, such as Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos' multi-volume *History of the Greek Nation*,¹⁵ helped reaffirm this conviction for nationalists, establishing an unassailable heritage claim and continuous thread between themselves and the Byzantine Empire, as well as further back to Classical Greece.¹⁶ Antiquities and archaeological remains further shaped the national imagination.¹⁷ The revolutionaries wished to build a citizenship anchored on religious affiliation, something that was ultimately encoded in the Constitution of 1822: “all those indigenous inhabitants of the state of Greece who believe in Christ are

throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That is, like other national identities, Greekness had to be *learned*, willingly or not. In a similar way, nationalists projected Orthodoxy as a homogenous entity even though this religious tradition and its meanings have changed over time. See: Effi Gazi, “Revisiting Religion and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Greece,” in *The Making of Modern Greece: Nationalism, Romanticism, and the Uses of the Past (1797–1896)*, ed. Roderick Beaton and David Ricks (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009).

¹⁴ Though nationalism has tended to be defined as a modern, secular ideology, replacing the religious systems of traditional societies, nationalisms “retain a number of religious features in a variety of combinations. They have their own sacred texts and prophets, their own faith and sacrifice, rituals and ceremonies, their own particular perceptions of community, history, and destiny.” In Gazi, “Revisiting Religion and Nationalism,” 96.

¹⁵ Κωνσταντίνος Παπαρρηγόπουλος, *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους* (Athens: 1860–1877).

¹⁶ This historical reconstruction has been symbolically captured in Greek architecture. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, for instance, is named after the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, just as Saint Demetrius—an important figure in Orthodox Christianity—serves as its main emblem.

¹⁷ Archaeology was (and still is) a powerful political tool for nation-states, which may deploy its findings to prove there exists stability and continuity in identity and culture through time. Ideological national narratives, in other words, are oftentimes underpinned by archaeological evidence. See: Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Deirdre Stritch, “Archaeological Tourism as a Signpost to National Identity,” in *Images, Representations and Heritage: Moving Beyond Modern Approaches to Archaeology*, ed. Ian Russell (Boston, Mass.: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2006), 42–60.

Greeks.”¹⁸ Moreover, the country’s independence day (25 March) is shrouded in religious overtones. It is the same date attributed to the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, thus linking Greek sovereignty with a core narrative and event of the Christian tradition.¹⁹

The Kingdom of Greece was established in 1832. The new nation sought to expand its territory to “redeem” all potential citizens of the nation—that is, Orthodox Christians—and not only those who had been incorporated into its borders when it achieved independence.²⁰ At the time, Greek territory did not include areas like Macedonia, Thessaly, and Thrace, and Greeks especially yearned to reclaim Constantinople. This expansionist vision was known as the *Megali Idea* (Μεγάλη Ιδέα in Greek, or “the Great Idea”), the irredentist²¹ project which dominated Greek politics until the 1920s. Thessaloniki figured as a key city in this plan, in particular because of its former role as the co-capital of the Byzantine Empire.²² When Eleftherios Venizelos—a lead proponent of the *Megali Idea*—became prime minister in 1910, he created an alliance with other Balkan nations against the Ottoman Empire. The ensuing Balkan

¹⁸ Quoted in Frary, “The Orthodox Church,” 490.

¹⁹ Throughout the Ottoman occupation of Greece, messianic myths—in which divine intervention would restore the Christian community—gave hope to Christian communities. According to Hatzopoulos, “Nationalists were quick to appropriate and reinterpret the old messianic discourse of resurrection in secular terms, in terms of the homeland and its people.” In “From Resurrection to Insurrection,” 85.

²⁰ Kenan Behzat Sharpe, “Hellenism without Greeks: The Use (and Abuse) of Classical Antiquity in Turkish Nationalist Literature,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 5:1 (2018): 183. Redemption—the act of (re)gaining possession of something in exchange for payment—is a religiously loaded term in the Christian context. To redeem someone is to deliver them from evil or sin by means of a sacrifice. To frame the Greek revanchist project as the redemption of Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians in Ottoman territory is to portray the project as a kind of modern-day crusade.

²¹ Irredentism refers to a political or popular movement in which members advocate for the restoration of a country or territory that they claim formerly belonged to them.

²² Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, 24.

Wars (1912–1913) resulted in a huge loss of European territory for the Ottoman Empire. Though both Bulgaria and Greece vied for Thessaloniki, the city was ultimately annexed by Greece on 8 November 1912. Ottoman Thessaloniki—which by this time was a center for Turkish nationalism—was now Greek Thessaloniki.²³

From this point forward, Thessaloniki’s urban landscape was completely transformed by Greek politicians and architects who were invested in erasing material evidence of the city’s Ottoman past and presence—as well as its Jewish one (see later in this chapter). They made use of ancient architecture, archaeological sites, and other monuments to commemorate the city’s “true” Christian and Byzantine identity and character. The Rotunda would play an important role in this shifting landscape. Indeed, urban planning, as I explain later, aimed to make physical markers like the Rotunda more accessible both spatially and visually, so that when people moved around in the city, they would be regularly reminded of Thessaloniki’s Christian and Byzantine heritage. Some of the decisions made during this period not only affect how the city’s past is remembered and celebrated today but laid the groundwork for some of the conflicts that erupted in the 1990s.

Two events in particular enabled this dramatic transformation of the city shortly after the Balkan Wars. The first were major demographic shifts, including a forced population exchange between Turkey and Greece. When Thessaloniki transitioned from Ottoman to Greek control, it had been experiencing a rapid rise in population. The city’s

²³ Turkish nationalism emerged in Thessaloniki at the turn of the twentieth century, becoming an ideological center of the Young Turk movement, and some of its most important supporters were from the area or published their ideas in the Ottoman city. One especially significant member was Mustafa Kemal, who would later become the founding head of the Republic of Turkey. Visitors can today go to Kemal’s birthplace in Thessaloniki, now known as the Atatürk Museum. The museum is a part of the Turkish Consulate complex.

population swelled from 50,000 inhabitants in 1850 to 135,000 in 1905.²⁴ At the time of the 1913 census, Jews made up 38.9% of the city's population, Muslims 29%, Greeks 25.3%, Bulgarians 3.9%, and "others" 2.7%. Within just three years, however, Greeks would become Thessaloniki's largest community, accounting for 41.3% of its population in 1916.²⁵ A compulsory population exchange between Turkey and Greece in the 1920s, a result of the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922),²⁶ further altered the demographic make-up of Thessaloniki.²⁷ This exchange saw approximately 1.2 million "Turkish nationals of the Greek Orthodox religion established in Turkish territory" forcibly migrate to Greece,²⁸ and approximately 500,000 "Greek nationals of the Moslem religion established in Greek territory" transferred to Turkey.²⁹ By the time the 1928 census was conducted, sixteen years after Greece annexed Thessaloniki, a large majority of Thessaloniki's 244,680 inhabitants were now Orthodox Christian (to the tune of 75.52%),

²⁴ Yerolympos, "Thessaloniki Before and After Ernest Hébrard," 5.

²⁵ By 1916, Jews made up 37% of the population and Muslims 18%. In Ioannis K. Hassiotis, *Queen of the Worthy: Thessaloniki, History and Culture* (Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, 1997), 39–40.

²⁶ Representatives of both governments signed the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations, also known as the Lausanne Convention, on 30 January 1923 in Lausanne, Switzerland. The forced exchange, according to Bruce Clark, was a "unprecedented exercise in ethnic engineering" (see: *Twice a Stranger: The Mass Expulsions that Forged Modern Greece and Turkey* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006]).

²⁷ One effect of the forced exchange was the massive influx of Greeks from other nearby areas, including from neighboring Balkan countries (approximately 33,000 from Bulgaria alone) and the southern provinces of the former Russian Empire (approximately 61,000 from Bessarabia, Ukraine, Crimea and the Caucasus). These migrations would further change the demographic composition of Thessaloniki. See: Hassiotis, *Queen of the Worthy*, 40.

²⁸ At the time, Greece had a population of about five million, therefore this influx of 1.2 million refugees was certainly not trivial. See: Sarah Shields, "The Greek-Turkish Population Exchange: Internationally Administered Ethnic Cleansing," *Middle East Report* 267 (2013): 2–6.

²⁹ The population transfer was therefore based on religious affiliation. Jews were exempt from the exchange. People living in Istanbul were also exempt from the exchange. See: "Lausanne Peace Treaty VI. Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations Signed at Lausanne, January 30, 1923," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, n.d. [Online](#).

while Jews still made up a significant but no longer majority portion of the population (22.58%). Muslims had virtually disappeared from the city, constituting only 0.42% of the population, with Catholics and Protestants constituting the rest.³⁰ The Upper Town of Thessaloniki, which had previously been the Muslim quarter of the city, was soon resettled by refugee families affected by the forced population exchange.³¹ Though the Muslim population had dramatically dwindled, there nevertheless remained a fear of their presence, as well as a discomfort with the Muslim heritage of the city, as Part II reveals.

The second event that dramatically altered Thessaloniki's urban landscape was the Great Fire of 1917, which destroyed most of the old quarters of the city (Figure 14). It was ignited by an unattended kitchen fire on 18 August, which spread quickly and burned down largely Jewish parts of the city.³² About two-thirds of the city was destroyed, including many religious buildings (sixteen synagogues, ten mosques, and three

³⁰ Ana Méropi Anastasiadou, "Salonique après 1912: La construction d'une ville néohellénique," in *Salonique: ville juive, ville ottomane, ville grecque* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2014), 97. The large influx of Greek refugees into Greece, according to one display panel at the White Tower of Thessaloniki (today a museum and monument), "enhanced" the Greek character of the city. At least within this museum, there is no acknowledgement of the traumatic effects that the disruption and uprootedness of a forced migration caused refugees.

³¹ By the late mid-twentieth century, 89% of the Upper Town's population was made up of refugees or descendants of refugees. This resettling of the area, according to Hassiotis, likely contributed to the preservation of this historical area of Thessaloniki. In *Queen of the Worthy*, 43.

³² The fire, and its disproportionate impact on the city's Jewish community, demonstrates how insular Thessaloniki's religious communities had been from one another. Though Thessaloniki had long functioned as a multicultural city, there was a clear spatial segregation of the city's inhabitants during the Ottoman period. The Muslim population was located in the Upper City, the northern hilled area of the city. The Jewish population primarily lived in the central and southern parts of the city, mostly located close to the sea. Orthodox Greeks inhabited parts of the central and southeastern areas of Thessaloniki. Finally, there were some other Europeans, mostly French, who occupied the southwestern area of the city. In Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, "Monumental Urban Space and National Identity: The Early Twentieth Century New Plan of Thessaloniki," *Journal of Historical Geography* 31:1 (2005): 65.



Figure 14: Large areas of Thessaloniki were destroyed by the Great Fire of 1917 (represented in black). Source: Wikipedia.org.

churches).³³ Despite the extent of the fire, no casualties were reported. Approximately 70,000 of the city's inhabitants, however, were left homeless, three-fourths of whom were Jews.³⁴ The fire became a landmark in the history of Thessaloniki and in the city's collective memory, as can be seen in some of its museums today.³⁵

After the fire, the face of the city rapidly changed, and Thessaloniki's urban landscape would come to exhibit a tension involving both continuity and discontinuity with the past. There was a noticeable emphasis on the Roman and Byzantine vestiges of the city and a break from its more recent Ottoman past. Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (1910–1920, 1928–1933), along with other important Greek authorities at the same, such as Prime Minister Alexandros Papanastasiou (1924, briefly in 1932), took this fire as an opportunity to transform Thessaloniki,³⁶ inviting British and French urban planners to see it, as Jewish Studies scholar Devin Naar characterized it, as a “blank

³³ Alexandra Yerolympos, “Urbanism as Social Engineering in the Balkans (1820–1920): Reform Prospects and Problems of Implementation in the Case Study of Thessaloniki,” in *Urbanism: Imported or Exported?*, ed. Mercedes Volait and Joe Nasr (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Academy, 2003), 113 ft. 6.

³⁴ Yerolympos, “Thessaloniki Before and After Ernest Hébrard,” 7.

³⁵ For instance, upon my visit to Thessaloniki in the summer of 2018, an exhibit at the Roman Agora presented the fire as a destructive force, erasing centuries-old (namely Jewish) neighborhoods, and another exhibit discussed the urban development plans that were proposed as a result of the fire.

Historically, fires have played a powerful role in reinventing cities or sections of cities. As the well-known architect René Danger once remarked, fires often “provided an opportunity for excellent urbanist operations” (quoted in Kalliopi Amygdalou, “Building the Nation at the Crossroads of ‘East’ and ‘West’: Ernest Hébrard and Henri Prost in the Near East,” *Opticon 1826* [16]: 1) In the case of Thessaloniki (and of Istanbul), fires also created “an exceptional opportunity [...] to *de-Ottomanize*” cities, to build an environment unlike “the previous Ottoman urban scape” (Emiliano Bugatti, “Urban Identities and Catastrophe: Izmir and Salonica at the End of the Ottoman Empire,” *Geographical Review* 103:4 [2013]: 499. Emphasis in the original).

³⁶ Though the face of Thessaloniki would have certainly changed after its incorporation into Greece, “the fire blew away all the obstacles to change that an ossified, centuries-old urban structure could present, and thus speeded up the city's adaptation to its future role as part of the modern Greek state.” In Yerolympos, “The Replanning of Thessaloniki,” 220.

slate.”³⁷ However, I argue that its rebuilding relied heavily on existing architecture. The city was not an entirely blank slate, but rather eyes were reoriented towards different buildings, towards different layers of the city’s palimpsestic past. While Roman and Byzantine buildings and roads were emphasized, the cultural and physical imprint of Thessaloniki’s Jewish and Muslim populations was largely obscured or even intentionally erased. Architecture and urban development thus served as political tools for the newly established Greek régime.

The Venizelos government organized an International Planning Committee and, two days after the fire broke out, forbade by royal decree the repair or rebuilding of burned houses. This rapid intervention, according to urban historian Pierre Lavedan, aimed to prevent the reconstruction of the city as it was before the fire.³⁸ The committee was headed by Ernest Hébrard, who was among an early-twentieth-century generation of famous French urban architects with global reach. Hébrard happened to be in Thessaloniki, working as Director of the Archaeological Service of the *Armée d’orient* (the Army of the Orient), when the fire broke out. His presence likely led to his involvement with the new urban plan for Thessaloniki.³⁹

Hébrard’s plan was completed in 1921. In brief, it shifted Thessaloniki’s urban landscape from the haphazard and labyrinthine streets that had marked the city’s Ottoman period to wider boulevards like the ones that can be seen in Paris today.⁴⁰ The plan erased

³⁷ Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, 241.

³⁸ Pierre Lavedan, “Un problème d’urbanisme: La reconstruction de Salonique,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 64:5 (1921): 238.

³⁹ Amygdalou, “Building the Nation,” 2.

⁴⁰ Hébrard was among a generation of twentieth-century French urban architects who deployed their skills in the *Beaux Arts* tradition (an academic architectural style taught at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris) in

neighborhood and community differences and created spatial divisions based on class distinctions, rather than the ethnic-religious lines that had previously defined the city.⁴¹

The plan also included upscale hotels like the Electra Palace, town squares, Aristotelous Square (a large open-air area in the city center), and a university campus.

In addition to this modernization, Hébrard's plan commemorated the city's Byzantine past through various means, including parks and statues designed to memorialize specific events and figures. The plan, according to architect historian Alexandra Yerolympos, also drew on "classical divisions (with axes, diagonals, monuments-focal points) [and] a hierarchical street network" which oriented eyes towards a selection of monuments considered "picturesque."⁴² Informed by a mentality that grounded aesthetic values in pre-Ottoman vestiges like Byzantine churches, Hébrard made these religious sites nodal points in his plan. Indeed, I contend that the "beautification" of the city—an important concept in nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban planning⁴³—rested upon this visual and spatial emphasis on Roman and Byzantine architecture. The buildings were placed along important street pattern axes and the areas around them were cleared. Churches, which were typically spatially introverted, now

other parts of the world. Hébrard himself completed projects in Greece, Morocco, and French Indochina. See: Bugatti, "Urban Identities and Catastrophe," 509.

⁴¹ Amygdalou, "Building the Nation," 3.

⁴² Yerolympos, "Thessaloniki Before and After Ernest Hébrard," 9. When Thessaloniki was established in the fourth century BCE, it followed a grid plan where streets were oriented NW-SE, a layout that was typical of early Hellenistic cities. This grid plan was seen as "*the* model of a city." Some of these streets still correspond to a few of Thessaloniki's major streets, such as Egnatia Street, which runs lengthwise across the middle of the city, and where the Arch of Galerius is located. The ancient Via Egnatia runs 5.4 meters or 18 feet below ground level.

⁴³ See: Donald J. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna* (London: Yale University Press, 1986).

became extroverted, transformed to be more open to the city, and therefore much more visible.⁴⁴ In other words, the city's pre-Ottoman past had been carved out and put on display for residents and visitors to behold.

The development of certain roads was also crucial to the urbanist's plan. First, Hébrard planned a monumental axis that connected Aristotelous Square to a (non-implemented) civic center, from which one's eye would be drawn uphill, to the upper city where the Byzantine walls sit. However, thanks to archaeological excavations, a Roman forum was uncovered precisely where Hébrard had proposed the civic center. Today, the bustling Aristotelous Square is visually and spatially connected to the city's Roman past, with the ancient agora and Roman forum sitting to the northeast. This axis connecting the square and forum is also called Aristotelous (Αριστοτέλους).

Second, roads were also built to connect ancient monuments with one another, such as the one designed between the Rotunda and the Arch of Galerius,⁴⁵ which today reaches directly to the Aegean Sea (Figure 15). Indeed, Hébrard seemed particularly interested in preserving these two sites, which he viewed as some of the most important ones in the city. As head of the Archaeological Service, Hébrard was able to demonstrate, through his analysis of the Byzantine-era city topography, that the Rotunda and the Arch of Galerius were originally connected by an urban axis. His master city plan therefore

⁴⁴ Lagopoulos, "Monumental Urban Space and National Identity," 70.

⁴⁵ The marble reliefs on the Arch's massive pillars celebrate Emperor Galerius' military victory over the Persians in 297 CE. The monument "is a prime example of tetrarchic Roman imperial propaganda," an articulation of "imperial violence and power." In Laura Salah Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki: Interpreting the Early Christian Rotunda," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13:4 (2005): 479, 478, respectively.

reconstituted this Byzantine axis, further confirming the two sites' architectural and historical importance.⁴⁶

This road, now called Dimitri Gounari (Δημητρίου Γούναρη), was built in a well-trodden residential and working area of the city. Today, it connects the two ancient sites to another important archaeological site, the Palace of Galerius. Pedestrians who traverse this path orient themselves around several ancient monuments, and are therefore reminded of the city's rich history in an immersive fashion. The road presents, as one scholar puts it, "an archaeological tour" of the city's Byzantine past.⁴⁷ Today, residents and visitors shop and enjoy coffee along the carless road, or eat gyros, ice cream, or one-



Figure 15: The Rotunda and Arch of Galerius are connected by a road that extends to the Aegean Sea (2021).

⁴⁶ Lagopoulos, "Monumental Urban Space and National Identity," 66; Lavedan, "Un problème d'urbanisme," 235.

⁴⁷ Yerolympos, "Thessaloniki Before and After Ernest Hébrard," 10.

euro pizza slices while perched on walls designed to protect the ample Byzantine remains that emerge from the modern urban landscape (Figure 16).⁴⁸ Daily life combines with historical life, where well curated layers of the past are publicly exhibited and celebrated through architecture and archaeological remains.

Hébrard's plan ultimately "de-Ottomanized" the face of Thessaloniki.⁴⁹ This erasure was part of a larger destructive trend. For instance, soon after the 1923 population exchange, in which Muslims were forced to leave Thessaloniki, Greek authorities—who viewed Ottoman heritage as symbols of barbaric foreign rule—demolished many of the city's minarets. The Rotunda's minaret is one notable exception and is the only remaining one in the city today; its survival has been a source of contestation in later debates over the site (Chapter 4) (Figure 17). Hébrard's plan not only exchanged this Ottoman history for a Greek one, but one that suggested a *continuous* Greek history. Five centuries of Ottoman rule was therefore understood as a moment of discontinuity. Over the course of the twentieth century, Thessaloniki's cityscape, its culture, and its history were curated to reflect Greek hegemony. The new urban plan commemorated the "true" identity of the city—the one before Ottoman occupation—and reduced the centuries-long multicultural Thessaloniki into a *Greek* city through and through. The evidence for this Greek identity

⁴⁸ The walls, however, serve more as a deterrent than a physical barrier. The ancient remains are fairly accessible to those who wish to breach the walls; graffiti in some areas demonstrate how some individuals have done exactly that.

⁴⁹ According to Robert M. Hayden, to de-Ottomanize, or mark something as no longer Ottoman, involved displacing Muslim religious structures with Christian ones ("Intersecting Religioscapes in Post-Ottoman Spaces: Trajectories of Change, Competition, and Sharing of Religious Spaces," in *Post-Ottoman Coexistence: Sharing Space in the Shadow of Conflict*, ed. Rebecca Bryant [New York: Berghahn Books, 2016], 66). However, some scholars have noted how Hébrard did look to save some of the city's Ottoman heritage, such as the covered market—though they never held an important position in the master plan (Amygdalou, "Building the Nation," 14).



Figure 16: Apartment buildings overlook ancient ruins on Dimitri Gounari. The Rotunda and its minaret can be seen in the background (2018).



Figure 17: The Rotunda's Ottoman minaret is the only remaining one in Thessaloniki (2021).

was visible in the city's landscape, spatially confirmed in the ancient remains that peppered the city or lay mere meters underground. It simply had to be excavated and highlighted, while later accretions in the urban landscape were removed in order to appreciate the city's rightful and continuous link to the pre-Ottoman era.⁵⁰

Though these transformations represented a selective curation of Thessaloniki's past, previous layers of the city's history were nevertheless still, though faintly, perceptible. A few surviving, though repurposed, Ottoman buildings can be located today. These sites comprise the fifteenth-century Alaca Imaret Mosque, the "colorful mosque" that includes a public kitchen house (no longer in use); Hamza Bey Mosque, also known as Alkazar, after a movie theatre that operated in its premises for decades after the Ottoman era; Bey Hamam, a bathhouse known as the "Baths of Paradise"; Bezesteni Market, a former fabric market that now houses clothing, jewelry, and florist shops; and the sixteenth-century Aigli Geni Hamam, a bathhouse converted into a bar with musical evenings. These vestiges provide a counternarrative to Thessaloniki's hegemonic Greek landscape.⁵¹

Similarly, there are only some traces of Thessaloniki's formerly rich Jewish presence. Though an examination of the Rotunda necessitates a focus on Christian-

⁵⁰ The actual reconstruction of Thessaloniki was slow and marred by various issues, such as conflicting property interests, the compulsory population exchange, and a lack of funds. Though Hébrard's plan is visible in Thessaloniki's urban landscape today, this layout took time to integrate and it does not exist exactly as Hébrard had planned it. That said, the city's streets and overall layout are certainly defined and oriented by its Roman-Byzantine history. One must put more effort in searching for the city's Ottoman and Jewish past.

⁵¹ This lack of attention to Ottoman heritage is a common feature of heritage preservation in Greece. Mary Beard writes: "The plain fact is that less attention has been devoted to the monuments of Turkish Greece than to any other period of the country's archaeology." In *The Parthenon*, Rev. Ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 68.

Muslim and Greek-Ottoman dynamics, it is important to recognize that Thessaloniki was culturally and demographically more Jewish than Ottoman starting in the sixteenth century until the city's annexation.⁵² The city was popularly known as “La Madre de Israel” (“Mother of Israel”) or the “Jerusalem of the Balkans.” Thessaloniki was a city where Shabbat marked the day of rest and Ladino (or Judeo-Spanish⁵³) was commonly heard on its streets. This Jewish presence, however, gradually decreased following the city's annexation by Greece, until most of the Jewish population was exterminated under the 1941–1944 German occupation of Thessaloniki,⁵⁴ when it became the strategic Nazi headquarters for the occupied Balkan region.⁵⁵ Much of Jewish architecture was destroyed with the fire of 1917. Even the linguistic heritage of Jewish residents was overshadowed in the first half of the twentieth century, with Greek supplanting Ladino, Hebrew, and French.⁵⁶

⁵² Following the 1492 Alhambra Decree that expelled Jews from Spain, Greece received nearly 20,000 Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. Many of them ended up in Thessaloniki, thus increasing its Jewish population to 15,715 in the year 1519—more than half of the city's 30,000 inhabitants. Jews from Spain may have been attracted to the Ottoman Empire thanks to the Sultan Bayazid II's promises of political and economic protections. In Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430–1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 45.

⁵³ Judeo-Spanish was a language based on Iberian dialects from the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries, which also integrated linguistic elements from Hebrew, Aramaic, Turkish, Greek, and, later on, Italian and French. In Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, xxiii.

⁵⁴ Violence against Jews in Thessaloniki became more rampant in the first half of the twentieth century. For instance, during the pogrom known as the Campbell Riots, the Jewish neighborhood known as Camp Campbell was set on fire by right-wing extremists on 29 June 1931.

⁵⁵ The Jewish men of the city had been repeatedly and publicly humiliated in the city's Elefterias Square in the summer of 1942, and then two years into the occupation, more than 45,000 Jews were shipped to Auschwitz and Birkenau in March 1943. According to Naar, “Nazis unwittingly solidified the Hellenization of the city” (*Jewish Salonica*, 11). Of this number, less than 2,000 returned to the city after World War II (Anastassiadou, “Salonique après 1912,” 98).

⁵⁶ Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, 31.

This history is remembered in different ways today. A monument was erected in 1997 to commemorate the deportation of Jews during Nazi-occupation (Figure 18); the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, which houses documents, ritual objects, photographic collections, and a library, was opened in 2001; and a memorial was unveiled at the University of Aristotle in 2014 to remember the Jewish cemetery on which the university was founded. The Holocaust Museum of Greece—officially the Holocaust Memorial Museum & Educational Center of Greece on Human Rights—is currently under construction in Thessaloniki. Unlike the Ottoman vestiges that survived, perhaps due to their repurposing, Jewish memorials had to be *reintroduced* into the urban landscape, a conscious effort to remember an erased history, in large part because of the incredibly destructive force of the Great Fire of 1917.

However, a careful search of the city’s palimpsestic layers reveal some “lost” objects that reflect this former Jewish presence. One place to search is in tombstones. The



Figure 18: Monument commemorates the 50,000 Jews deported from Nazi-occupied Thessaloniki (2021).

Jewish cemetery, established in the fifteenth century and containing almost half a million burials, was demolished under Nazi occupation of Thessaloniki, though not all of its contents were destroyed. Tombstones were appropriated, repurposed, and/or sold as building materials by city officials and the Greek Orthodox Church, even after Nazi occupation ended.⁵⁷ They were used in walls, roads, and churches throughout Thessaloniki. The Church of St. Demetrius (also known as the Church of Agios Dimitrios), which was originally established in the early fourth century, was reconstructed with some of these remains. Thus, Jewish heritage was woven into the very fabric of the urban landscape, with its vestiges physically supporting a Greek hegemonic narrative of the past. One just needs to know where to look—or *how to* look—to find the Jewish imprint on the city.

It is within this urban landscape of continuity and discontinuity, of preservation and rupture, that the Rotunda was made into a monument and museum, a topic I discuss in the next chapter. Through the design of Dimitri Gounari, eyes were and continue to be oriented towards what were deemed city's most important historic sites. The Rotunda offered visual and physical proof of Thessaloniki's connection to the Roman-Byzantine world, confirmed through archaeological excavations that took place at the site after it was made into a monument. The Rotunda thus played a role in establishing Thessaloniki's historical and religious importance as well.

⁵⁷ The blame for these sacrilegious actions, therefore, cannot be placed entirely on decisions made by Nazis. See: Kostis Kornetis, "Expropriating the Space of the Other: Property Spoliations of Thessalonican Jews in the 1940s," in *The Holocaust in Greece*, ed. Giorgos Antoniou and A. Dirk Moses (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 248.

Istanbul (and Hagia Sophia)

In 1923, the city of Constantinople, now officially recognized as Istanbul, became a part of the newly established Republic of Turkey. This new status would generate a renewal of the city, much like in Thessaloniki, and which similarly hinged on the Europeanization of its urban landscape. Hagia Sophia would become entwined in the city's metamorphosis, when it was declared a monument and museum shortly after the establishment of the Republic.

Leading up to Turkish independence, leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress, a political reform movement known by European and American powers as the Young Turks, became especially active, demanding a constitutional government within the Ottoman Empire. There were several coups at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth.⁵⁸ In the midst of this political instability, the Ottomans saw major territorial losses in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, including Thessaloniki, and found themselves on the losing side of the First World War.⁵⁹ Following the Armistice of Mudros (which ended hostilities between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied forces), the Allies partitioned Ottoman territory under the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. The Allies also disbanded the Ottoman Parliament the same year. The city of Constantinople and other

⁵⁸ The Ottoman Constitution of 1876, mentioned earlier in this chapter, was adopted during this political unrest. However, much of this reform work was undone by Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who came into power in 1876. He abolished the new constitution, censored the press, emphasized Islam, and was responsible for the systematic violence, mass murder, and expulsion of ethnic Armenians from the Ottoman Empire. He was ultimately overthrown in 1909. In Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, 21.

⁵⁹ The Ottomans were in alliance with the Central Powers (German and Austria-Hungary). The Ottoman Empire had been on a losing streak for centuries. Since 1699, the empire had lost most of the wars it had fought. Its defeat in World War I was therefore not without precedence, but this time the Ottomans faced a complicated constellation of interests, between the Allies and the Turkish nationalists. This would soon lead to the fall of the empire, which was, as Eugene Rogan explains, more “a result of the terms of peace than of the magnitude of their defeat.” In *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 305.

Ottoman territories were occupied by British, French, Italian, and Greek forces starting in 1918, an occupation celebrated by the city's Christian population. This was the first time the city had changed hands since 1453, when Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II had entered Constantinople and converted Hagia Sophia into an imperial mosque.

The occupation of Constantinople had the unintended consequence of mobilizing the Turkish National Movement. As Sean McMeekin describes it, the Treaty of Sèvres “was the best possible recruiting poster for [the Turkish] nationalist army.”⁶⁰ Turks were resentful of the presence of foreign armies on their territory.⁶¹ From 1919 to 1923, Turks fought the Allies in the Turkish War of Independence. The Grand National Assembly of Turkey was established in the city of Ankara on 23 April 1920 by Mustafa Kemal—a Turkish army officer born in Ottoman Thessaloniki—and his supporters, thus transferring sovereign power away from Ottoman Constantinople.⁶² The war of independence ended with Turkish victory on 24 July 1923. The Armistice of Mudros was superseded by the

⁶⁰ Sean McMeekin, “World War I and the Establishment of the Republic,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Turkey*, ed. Metin Heper and Sabri Sayarı (New York: Routledge, 2012), 41. The Ottoman government and the nationalist Turks vied for power during this tumultuous period. The Ottoman government believed it had no choice but to agree to the terms of the peace treaty put forward by the victorious Allied forces. The Turkish nationalists, on the other hand, rejected the terms and resisted the partition.

⁶¹ The terms “Ottomans,” “Turks,” and even “Muslims” (of the Ottoman Empire) have oftentimes been used interchangeably, though not all Ottomans were Muslims and not all Ottoman Muslims were Turks. Historically, the term Turk typically referred to those who spoke some dialect of the Turkish language. However, under article 88 of the Republic of Turkey's 1924 Constitution, all citizens within the nation were considered Turks, regardless of their race or religion. The constitution is available [online](#) in Turkish.

⁶² 23 April is now celebrated as National Sovereignty and Children's Day in Turkey.

Treaty of Lausanne,⁶³ the same treaty which also enforced a population exchange between Greece and Turkey.⁶⁴

Following this treaty, the Allies left the area and the Grand National Assembly, under the continued leadership of Kemal, declared the Republic of Turkey on 29 October 1923. Kemal became the new nation's first president and was later conferred the surname "Atatürk," meaning "father of the Turks," in recognition for the role he played in creating the modern state of Turkey. By this time, an official decree had already ended the sultanate—a secular form of government led by a political and military leader—on 1 November 1922, and the last Sultan, Mehmed VI, had been exiled to Malta. On 3 March 1924, the Ottoman caliphate—a form of government led by a religious and political leader regarded as a successor to the Prophet Mohammed—was abolished and the last Caliph, Abdulmejid II, sent into exile. The Ottoman Empire had come to an end.

The new Republic of Turkey became a secular, ethnic nation-state.⁶⁵ It imposed state control over religious institutions, secularized many aspects of Turkish society, and embraced Western culture. When the Caliphate was abolished, for instance, the new

⁶³ Two parties, however, were absent from Lausanne: The Armenians and the Kurds, two substantial non-Turkish minorities in the Ottoman Empire: "these continue [today] to nurse grievances against the Near Eastern peace settlement." In Andrew Mango, *From the Sultan to Atatürk: Turkey* (London: Haus Publishing, 2009), 96.

⁶⁴ Much like the Jewish and Muslim population of Thessaloniki was almost entirely eliminated over the course of the twentieth century, so, too, did the population of Istanbul see massive decreases in Christian and Jewish populations. The Greek population, for instance, left in large numbers in part because of oppressive taxes by the Turkish government, in part because Greeks no longer felt safe in the city, among other reasons. Despite the Treaty of Lausanne's exemption of Greeks living in Istanbul, somewhere between 70,000 and 150,000 Greeks emigrated from the city between 1922 and 1926. As Thomas F. Madden notes, "The city, much like the nation, has become Turkish." In *City of Majesty at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: Viking, 2016), 350.

⁶⁵ McMeekin writes: "In some ways the Kemalist republic that emerged out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire was a creature of its time, as ethnic nation-states replaced, one by one, the old chaotic multiethnic empires, which had improbably endured for so long." In "World War I," 42.

nation aimed to remove religious institutions' influence on public policy.⁶⁶ The same year it established the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). This department was responsible for employing and supervising mosque personnel and enforcing laws on religious practice and worship; it is the directorate that manages Hagia Sophia Mosque today. The call to prayer was converted into and recited in Turkish from the original Arabic, though this practice would only last seventeen years.⁶⁷

The new government introduced various secularizing measures. This included the adoption of the Gregorian calendar to replace the Islamic one, and the declaration of Sunday as an official holiday, rather than the Islamic Friday. In 1928, the reference to Islam as Turkey's official religion was dropped from the nation's Constitution. The *fez*, a typically red felt headdress that became a symbol of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, was banned in 1925 and government officials were obligated by law to wear the European-style brimmed hat. Women's veiling was highly discouraged.⁶⁸ The Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic one, further severing Turkey's link with its Muslim Ottoman past. Furthermore, the nation's ideologues and artists, like the sociologist Ziya Gökalp, actively grappled with two identities through the arts: Turkey's national culture, embodied in its ethnic and folk elements, and the international, Western civilization,

⁶⁶ The relationship of state and religion in Turkey is one in which religion is regulated and utilized by the state. It is defined by the term *laiklik*, derived from the French *laïceté*, meaning secularism.

⁶⁷ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "An Alternative Reading of Religion and Authoritarianism: The New Logic Between Religion and State in the AKP's New Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19:1 (2019): 85.

⁶⁸ Banu Gökarıksel writes: "women's 'emancipation' through *unveiling* became the necessary condition, vehicle, and embodiment of the modern secular republic" ("Beyond the Officially Sacred: Religion, Secularism, and the Body in the Production of Subjectivity," *Social & Cultural Geography* 10:6 [2009]: 662). Though the early Republic discouraged the veil, it did not ban it. Legal restrictions would follow the military coup of 1980 (known as the "headscarf ban").

appreciated for its technical and scientific achievements.⁶⁹ The newly-formed Republic made “a total civilisational shift” away from the Ottoman Empire’s multicultural identity to a more monocultural Turkish identity that was informed by Western secularism and culture.⁷⁰

When Turkey’s founders transferred the country’s capital to distant Ankara, Istanbul laid neglected for some time. The population of the city dwindled from one million inhabitants prior to World War I to about 700,000 inhabitants in 1927. Istanbul’s economy was also negatively affected. Frequent fires further impacted numerous neighborhoods, including the historical city located within the Byzantine walls. Although Istanbul did not experience the same devastation by fire as its neighbor to the west, Thessaloniki, these fires nevertheless further exacerbated the neglected state of the former capital city.

In the early 1930s, Turkey’s politicians shifted their attention back to Istanbul, with the aim of remodeling the city “in line with the Kemalist spirit.”⁷¹ French architect

⁶⁹ Early Republic nationalism turned to the nation’s pre-Islamic past while also emphasizing Anatolian folk culture, both offering a “timeless source for Turkishness.” In Sibel Bozdoğan, “Art and Architecture in Modern Turkey: The Republican Period,” in *The Cambridge History of Turkey. Volume 4: Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 440.

Nationalist Turkish education put forth two important theses: (1) the Turkish History Thesis, which proposed that Turks contributed to civilization long before the Ottomans, as descendants of Central Asian civilizations that migrated to Anatolia, such as the Hittites and the Sumerians; and (2) the Sun Language Theory, which claimed ancient Turkish as the origin of many or most languages of the world. In Murat Gül, *Architecture and the Turkish City: An Urban History of Istanbul Since the Ottomans* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 73–74.

⁷⁰ Bozdoğan, “Art and Architecture in Modern Turkey,” 429. Some Turkish artistic productions from this period even made overt links to the French Revolution, as can be seen, for instance, in Zeki Faik İzer’s 1933 painting *İnkılap Yolunda*, or “Path of the Revolution,” which shares strong, explicit similarities with Eugène Delacroix’s *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, or “Liberty Leading the People.” According to Bozdoğan, İzer portrays the Kemalist Revolution as an insurgency against the backwardness of the *ancien régime* (429–30).

⁷¹ Gül, *Architecture and the Turkish City*, 54.

and urban planner Henri Prost was invited to become the city's head urbanist, a position he maintained for about fifteen years (1936–1951).⁷² A graduate of the *École Spéciale d'Architecture* and *École des Beaux-Arts* in France, Prost had experience in modernizing North African Islamic cities.⁷³ He also had previous experience working in Istanbul, having conducted studies of Hagia Sophia and its surroundings between 1904 and 1907. This archaeological study would have an important impact on how Prost would approach the restructuring of the historic city center of Istanbul, just as was the case with Ernest Hébrard in Thessaloniki, vis-à-vis his study of the Rotunda and Arch of Galerius.⁷⁴

The 1937 Prost Plan was Istanbul's first master plan. It was not fully implemented, as was also the case with Thessaloniki's, in large part due to the government's inability to finance the project, but several changes were nevertheless implemented. Prost's plan focused on the part of the city west of the Bosphorus strait, the area known as the "European" side of Istanbul, distinguished from the "Asian" side located on the eastern side of the strait. Broadly, it proposed creating and widening boulevards and squares, designing eighteen parks in the spaces made empty by fires,

⁷² Other famous urban planners were interested in the Istanbul project. A letter by Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, a pioneer of modern architecture, reveals his failed attempt to win this commission: "One of the biggest mistakes I made in my life was the letter I wrote to Atatürk. If I had not written this letter, I would have been working on the plan of Istanbul in place of my rival Prost. In this letter I advised the greatest reformer of a nation to conserve the city of Istanbul with its centuries old dust." Quoted in Candaş Bilisel, "Shaping a Modern City Out of an Ancient Capital: Henri Prost's Plan for the Historical Peninsula of Istanbul" (Barcelona: 11th Conference of the International Planning History Society, July 2004).

⁷³ Prost was among the same famous generation of French urbanists that Hébrard also belonged to. According to extant correspondence between the two, they appear to have been friends. In a letter written to Prost in July 1921, Hébrard communicates his excitement for the city plan but also frustration regarding the lack of financial investment in implementing the new developments, writing: "The new plan for Thessaloniki is ready. It will be implemented from now on. There are a few public buildings remaining and the post office is ready but there's no money [...] Like the plan for Athens, the war is absorbing everything [...] I am fascinated by Thessaloniki and would like to stay involved." Quoted in Giota Mirsioti, "The Fire that Transformed Thessaloniki," *Ekathimerini*, 15 February 2017. [Online](#). Square brackets in the original.

⁷⁴ Bilisel, "Shaping a Modern City."

rehabilitating poorer areas of the city, improving hygiene standards, and conserving historic monuments. According to architecture scholar İpek Akpınar, parts of this plan were characterized by “a powerful visual aspect, reproducing images of Europe.”⁷⁵ These redesigned urban, public spaces (*espaces libres*) were intended to be functional while also adhering to the Turkish principle of *güzelleştirme*, or beautification.

The concept of *espaces libres* was an important part of Turkey’s modernization project, acting as visual markers of the nation’s secular reforms.⁷⁶ Such spaces enabled men and women to mix with one another, in contrast to the separation of the sexes that had previously marked Ottoman society. The eighteen city parks proposed, I argue, were a materialization of the country’s secularization project.⁷⁷ They introduced a new regime and a new mentality which was embedded into the very materiality of the urban landscape. Much like Thessaloniki’s transformation was informed by a desire to de-Ottomanize the urban landscape, Istanbul underwent a similar, radical cultural transformation.

One of Prost’s main aims in developing his master plan for Istanbul was to preserve and develop some of the city’s historical areas and monuments. His plan carved out an archaeological park within the historical city, located at the tip of the city’s

⁷⁵ İpek Akpınar, “The Rebuilding of İstanbul Revisited: Foreign Planners in the Early Republican Years,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 50 (2014): 60.

⁷⁶ The concept of *espaces libres* was developed by the highly influential French urbanist and architect Eugène Hénard, who wanted to preserve green spaces in cities. In the Parisian context, such spaces were for “urban beautification and public hygiene, while conserving the ancient settlements and monuments of the city.” Quoted in Akpınar, “The Rebuilding of İstanbul Revisited,” 73.

⁷⁷ Gülden Erkut and M. Reza Shirazi deploy “physicalisation of secularisation” to discuss the making of Taksim Gezi Park (*Dimensions of Urban Re-Development. The Case of Beyoğlu, Istanbul* [Berlin: TU Berlin, 2014]). I find this concept very relevant for describing Prost’s master city plan, though I adopt the more commonly used term “materialization” instead.

western peninsula, in the Sultanahmet neighborhood. The park included Sultan Ahmed Mosque (popularly known as the Blue Mosque), the Byzantine maritime fortifications, and the Hippodrome, among other sites. This is the area that today surrounds Hagia Sophia and Topkapi Palace, one zone of the four-zoned UNESCO World Heritage site known as the Historic Areas of Istanbul (inscribed in 1985).⁷⁸ To create this “open-air museum,” the area was cleared of more recent, unsightly buildings and construction zones. Indeed, in his general report, Prost wished to see a notable separation between modern and ancient buildings (*Que tous les monuments historiques et vestiges du passé soient conservés et préservés d’un contact trop direct avec les édifices modernes*).⁷⁹ Just as Thessaloniki’s churches were made extrovert in Hébrard’s plan, so too, the historical sites of Istanbul were made more visible, in turn reinforcing their monumentality and significance. Prost’s urban planning contributed to the development of what is Istanbul’s modern heritage industry, and one of its main attractions, Hagia Sophia, was thereby made more accessible, both visually and physically.

Prost’s concern for conserving the historical parts of the city led him to collaborate with several institutes of archaeology, and he requested financial support from the *Institut de France* for the city’s archaeological remains.⁸⁰ Significantly, Prost preserved many of the Roman-Byzantine vestiges of the city. His archaeological park was a very visible reference to Istanbul’s Byzantine history. Although his plan did not aim to remove the remains of Ottoman rule in the same way city officials in Thessaloniki

⁷⁸ The other four areas include: Suleymaniye quarter, Zeyrek area, and the area along the Theodosian walls.

⁷⁹ Henri Prost states: In “Rapport général,” in *L’urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux: communications & rapports*, Vol.1, ed. Jean Royer (La Charité-sur-Loire: Delayance, 1932), 23.

⁸⁰ Bilsel, “Shaping a Modern City.”

did—who tore down minarets and neglected mosques and Ottoman baths—there was nevertheless a similar emphasis on pre-Ottoman Empire monuments. This interest in the city’s Byzantine remains may have been informed by his time studying Hagia Sophia and its archaeological surroundings in the early 1900s. In his general report, Prost indicates his desire that these ancient vestiges be actively preserved and placed under the direction of conservation specialists (*Que la découverte et la conservation de tous les vestiges de l’antiquité soient activement poursuivies et placées sous la direction de techniciens spécialistes*).⁸¹ He therefore demonstrated concern for the careful stewardship of these remains.

During Prost’s tenure,⁸² the Turkish Council of Ministers declared on 24 November 1934, by official decree, that Hagia Sophia would no longer serve as a mosque but as a museum and a “unique architectural monument of art.”⁸³ The heritage landscape of Istanbul, and Turkey more broadly, had been undergoing radical changes prior to this decision, starting at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth when museums emerged throughout the city. Istanbul’s Archaeological Museum, for instance, was established in 1891, a short time before the creation of the Republic. This museum was soon followed by several others, including the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, the Naval Museum, and the Military Museum.⁸⁴ The nation’s antiquities

⁸¹ Prost, “Rapport général,” 23.

⁸² Prost was dismissed in the early 1950s by the newly elected Democrat Party. This landslide victory introduced a new era in Turkey, marking the end of the Republican People’s Party hegemony in Turkish politics and cultural life.

⁸³ Quoted in Robert S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950: Holy Wisdom Modern Monument* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xvii.

⁸⁴ Originally opened as the Museum of Islamic Endowments in 1914, the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts was renamed soon after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. The Military Museum, originally

now had a home within their own borders; for centuries, antiquities had been shipped off to other nations willing to pay the right price tag. Furthermore, Turkey invited European and American specialists to conduct archaeological digs in Istanbul.⁸⁵

It is within this rapidly shifting urban landscape of the early twentieth century that Hagia Sophia was made into a monument and museum, a topic I discuss in the next chapter. Through Prost's design of an archaeological park in the peninsula of Istanbul, Hagia Sophia became visual and physical proof of the city's connection to the Roman-Byzantine world, in turn highlighting Istanbul's historical and religious importance as well. Archaeologists, art historians, and preservationists worked to uncover hidden layers of Hagia Sophia's palimpsestic history—quite literally, in some instances, as with the removal of plaster atop Byzantine mosaics.

In the next chapter, I examine how the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia were caught up in these urban renewal and secularization projects. Made into monuments and museums, the two religious sites became memorials that bore witness to the complex histories of Thessaloniki and Istanbul. Modernization and secularization seemed to go hand in hand in these cities, as political leaders sought to disentangle them from their Ottoman predecessors. In their new secular roles, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia once again physically embodied broader social changes, just as they had done for centuries.

built in 1841, served as a military academy until 1936 (when the academy was moved to Ankara) and then was used by the military for the next thirty years. Mustafa Kemal was one among those who studied there.

⁸⁵ Madden, *Istanbul*, 345.

Chapter 3: Secularizing and Sacralizing Religious Places

*“Real museums are places where Time is transformed into Space.”*¹

Shortly after Thessaloniki’s annexation to Greece, following the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, the Rotunda—which had functioned as a mosque since the sixteenth century—was declared a monument, and plans were made to use it as a museum for Byzantine objects. Similarly, not long after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, Hagia Sophia—which had functioned as an imperial mosque since 1453—was converted into a museum space, and religious use of the site was restricted. These events, I argue in this chapter, represented an important shift towards the “secularization” of these sites. Although ancient and Byzantine buildings in Thessaloniki and Istanbul had long been understood to be of historical importance prior to early twentieth-century urbanization shifts, with both cities enjoying tourism and pilgrimage as a result,² it was the master plans developed by French urbanists, in discourse with state officials, that shifted how these sites were valued and used. The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia had been understood and accessed as religious places for centuries, but through deliberate state decisions, they were officially recognized as secularized heritage when they were declared to be monuments and museums. Although the stakeholders involved in this process may not have specifically used the term “heritage” when carving out areas of importance in

¹ Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*, trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 510.

² For instance, art historian Robert S. Nelson reports: “with the coming of a direct rail connection to Western Europe in the late nineteenth century, Istanbul was successfully marketed and redefined as a place of exoticism and eroticism in sources as diverse as travel posters, travel writing, and mystery novels.” Hagia Sophia figured among the sites to see. In “Tourists, Terrorists, and Metaphysical Theater at Hagia Sophia,” in *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Rose Olin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 62–63.

Thessaloniki and Istanbul, the shifts that took place would lead to the emergence of these cities' heritage industries, which, as I argue in Chapter 2, focused in particular on the cities' pre-Ottoman, mostly Byzantine, pasts. The following considers how the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia's new statuses as monuments and museums brought important changes in how the sites were conceptualized, accessed, and politicized. Their conversion enabled a radical break from their Ottoman and religious pasts.

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia's twentieth-century transformations generated a tension involving both the preservation and destruction of their architectural and artistic features, just as these forces were at play when the two sites were adapted to new religious uses prior to the twentieth century. However, this time around, modifications would prioritize the sites' preservation (which limited how the site could be used) rather than their religious usage. I argue in this chapter that there was a cost to these decisions. Though heritage status provided the funds and resources necessary for excavating and preserving the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, it simultaneously sowed the seeds for the (sometimes violent) conflicts over these sites in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries (Part II). In other words, even "secular" stewardship models—which are celebrated for their narrow focus on site preservation—can in fact be destructive and even dangerous.

In what follows, I summarize some developments at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia soon after Thessaloniki and Istanbul were made part of nation-states and briefly consider the role of monuments and museums within state formation and the creation and maintenance of national identities. I identify what this new status meant both for the preservation and conservation of the sites themselves, in terms of the archaeological and

restoration works that took place as a result, and for their use and access, in terms of how the sensorial encounters and ritual experiences of these spaces were regulated and restricted. The remaking of these two places, I argue, circumscribed *religious* activity while reframing the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia's significance as *sacred heritage*. Though heritage-making has been argued to be an inherently secularizing act, I argue for its strong sacralizing power.

Preservation

The Rotunda and Thessaloniki

Perhaps already during the Ottoman period, or certainly shortly after the annexation of Thessaloniki to Greece, the Rotunda was called the Church of St. George (also known as the Church of Agios Georgios) by Christians, a name derived from a nearby chapel of the same name.³ The Rotunda was then reconsecrated and dedicated to St. George by the Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Gennadios around 1912,⁴ and thus it functioned again as a church either during or right after the First Balkan War, but only for a very brief period.⁵ The religious use of the Rotunda, however, was circumscribed after it was declared a national monument by the Commander-in-Chief of Macedonia on 5 July 1913.

³ Laura Salah Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki: Interpreting the Early Christian Rotunda," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13:4 (2005): 472.

⁴ Κύα Τζήμου, "Θεσσαλονίκη Η Ροτόντα 'απελευθερώνεται' μετά από 40 χρόνια," *Parallaxi*, 16 December 2015. [Online](#). In Greek Orthodox churches, a Metropolitan is in charge of a Metropolis, an ecclesiastical district, also known as a diocese in the western Christian tradition.

⁵ Charles Stewart, "Who Owns the Rotonda?: Church vs. State in Greece," *Anthropology Today* 14:5 (1998): 4.

To list a site as a monument means to recognize officially its historical importance and to identify a need to protect and preserve it. Monuments commemorate famous or notable individuals and events. They pepper the built environment, imposing “a permanent memory on the very landscape within which we order our lives.”⁶ According to cultural memory scholar James Edward Young, “A monument becomes a point of reference amid other parts of the landscape, one node among others in a topographical matrix that orients the rememberer and creates meaning in both the land and our recollections.”⁷ In other words, monuments render our surroundings into mnemonic and meaning-filled places. Monuments can be purposefully made, such as war memorials, or sites can be made into monuments, as was the case with the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia. As physical structures, they are meant to last, recalling events far beyond living memory. They are not easily adaptable to change, though the public may take it upon themselves to modify monuments, either through graffiti, removal, or destruction.⁸ In this way, they are social entities, representing the wants and desires of changing

⁶ Kirk Savage, “The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 143.

⁷ James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 7.

⁸ For instance, in the United States, there have been an increasing number of Confederate monuments and memorials removed from public spaces. Accused of glorifying white supremacy and celebrating a government whose founding principles were based in practices of slavery, Confederate memorials came under increased critique in the wake of the 2015 Charleston church shooting (in which nine African Americans were killed in one of the oldest black churches in the country); the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (an event which drew hundreds of white supremacists and neo-Nazis); and the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in 2020. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, in 2020 alone, 168 Confederate symbols were removed across the United States, ninety-four of them monuments (“2020 Confederate Symbol Removals,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, n.d. [Online](#)). However, hundreds more Confederate monuments continue to inform the landscapes of southern states in particular. Those who object to their removal claim that the monuments are a part of the United States’ cultural heritage (“Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 1 February 2019. [Online](#)).

societies, and are therefore sometimes the locations for highly politicized acts.⁹ The monuments that inform our landscapes dictate what aspects of the past we remember, or what we *ought* to remember. Importantly, they give the illusion that citizens share a common memory, of a cohesive, shared heritage grounded in the past, and can thus conceal hegemonic memories and collectivities.¹⁰ Monuments are, therefore, effective tools of nation-states. The Rotunda, in its capacity as a monument, served as an important reminder of Thessaloniki's pre-Ottoman identity.

Soon after receiving this status, the Rotunda was declared a “Macedonian Museum” by decree of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos in 1917 and its stewardship came under the Directorate of Byzantine Antiquities. However, this museum does not appear to have been implemented.¹¹ By 1920, the Rotunda served as an archaeological storehouse for Christian artifacts.¹² Not long after, the Greek Archaeological Service of Byzantine Studies established their headquarters in the Rotunda's courtyard. The Rotunda seems to have exhibited Christian artifacts at some point—photographs from the 1950s, for instance, show objects on display in the niches and apse¹³—until the building was closed on account of the 1978 earthquake that damaged some of Thessaloniki's

⁹ For monuments as “social beings,” see: Michael A. Di Giovine, *The Heritage-scape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009), 27.

¹⁰ Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 6; Savage, “The Politics of Memory,” 143.

¹¹ Τζήμου, “Θεσσαλονίκη Η Ροτόντα.”

¹² Nasrallah, “Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki,” 475, referencing Eutychia Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *Thessaloniki and Its Monuments* (Thessaloniki: Thessaloniki Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, 1985), 37.

¹³ For example, see: plate 3 in Theocharis Pazaras, *The Rotunda of Saint George in Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1985).

buildings. The public would again use the site in the 1990s—as Chapter 4 narrates—but its more formal reopening, after extensive restoration works, occurred in December 2015.

The role and identity of the Rotunda was thus somewhat fluid after Thessaloniki's incorporation into Greek national borders. Not much information is available to suggest how the site was actually used and accessed during this period, and accounts sometimes conflict. Charles Stewart reports that the Ninth Ephoria of Byzantine Antiquities, which administered the building between 1917 and 1978, occasionally granted permission to the Orthodox Church to use the site for religious services (two to three times a year), whereas journalist Kya Tzimou recounted that services were forbidden at the Rotunda starting in 1955, when its Roman identity was prioritized and the cross that adorned the top of the building since 1912 was removed.¹⁴ It is therefore difficult to ascertain to what extent the Rotunda was actively celebrated as a monument—or even as a church—by residents of Thessaloniki. As a result, the Rotunda may have functioned as a *passive* mnemonic marker in the urban landscape—as many monuments do.¹⁵ Even if the site was not regularly accessed, even if residents did not go to it to collectively commemorate the past, the Rotunda's prominent location in the city—as carved out and organized by Hébrard's master plan—nevertheless served as a material and visual reminder of

¹⁴ Τζήμου, “Θεσσαλονίκη Η Ροτόντα.” This lack of cross atop the Rotunda is a source of contention among some residents, as Chapter 4 narrates.

¹⁵ Paul Connerton argues that by representing memory—the past—through memorials and monuments, we are relieved of the responsibility to hold on to it. He writes: “The relationship between memorials and forgetting is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. If giving monumental shape to what we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by extension, cause others to be forgotten” (*How Modernity Forgets* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 29). Memorials can therefore engender forgetfulness. Even as an officially recognized monument, then, the Rotunda was not necessarily a site for active celebration of the past.

Thessaloniki's rich, complex history, something that was especially acknowledged in later conflicts over the site's use and status.

The Rotunda's historical importance was acknowledged throughout the twentieth century, through multiple archaeological excavations and its listing on official registries. In 1962, for instance, the Greek government declared the Rotunda to be a "historical conservation monument and archaeological space," which meant that no permanent changes could be made to the site without special permission.¹⁶ In 1988, the Rotunda became one of the "Paleochristian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki," a UNESCO World Heritage site that also included the Church of Acheiropoietos, the Church of Agios Dimitrios, the Monastery of Latomou, the Church of Agia Sophia, the Panagian ton Chalkeon, the Church of Agioi Apostoloi, the Church of Saint Nicolaos Orfanou, and the Church of Agios Panteleimon. This list, as the names of the monuments suggest, primarily celebrates Thessaloniki's *Christian* buildings. As a "Paleochristian and Byzantine monument," the Rotunda has served as a physical reminder of the city's Christian heritage, even though Thessaloniki's palimpsestic layers speak to a much more complex story.

Several conservation and archaeological projects followed the Rotunda's conversion, conducted over the course of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Starting in 1917, Ernest

¹⁶ Stewart, "Who Owns the Rotonda?," 4.

¹⁷ The terms preservation and conservation are used to denote some kind of protection, but *how* this protection is carried out (their strategies) and *why* (their justifications and objectives) differentiate the two. In general, the term conservation refers to the *management* of change through sustainable use and management for perpetual use. It takes into consider the evolution of an object, site, or landscape, and attempts to mitigate further deterioration. The Burra charter—which outlines basic principles and procedures for the conservation of Australian heritage places—defines conservation as "all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance." Thus, conservation should also aim to sustain heritage values. Conservation is interventive, a hands-on activity that works directly with the material. It is not, however, an attempt to return the object to its original state, which would be restoration work.

Hébrard, Thessaloniki's master urban planner, led an investigation by the Archaeological Service of the *Armée d'orient* (Army of the Orient), the French-led army that fought in the Balkans during World War I.¹⁸ This was around the same time that Venizelos' Provisional Government of National Defence,¹⁹ which had become disaffected with the Church, wished to install its museum of antiquities, the Macedonian Museum, within the Rotunda. What began as initial surveys became more comprehensive excavations of the site. In particular, Hébrard's scientific expedition established the Roman character of the Arch of Galerius and the Rotunda, and it confirmed that the two were once linked, forming or "a palatial architectural ensemble" (*un grandiose ensemble architectonique*; i.e., Galerian's imperial complex).²⁰ The "Turkish" area around the Rotunda was cleared, enabling it to regain, "to the benefit of art" (*au bénéfice de l'art*), its ancient proportions

On the other hand, the term preservation is sometimes used in a narrower way, a subset of conservation. It refers to the *maintenance* of something in its current condition, where human influence is curtailed in order to retard deterioration. In the context of a museum, preservation of an object is accomplished through various means including temperature control, security, lighting, etc. Preservation is preventative rather than interventive. Thus, preservation is intended to protect something from change or evolution, and may have the effect of freezing the object, site, or landscape's value in a particular point in time.

There is, however, overlap and sometimes contradictory uses of these two terms. According to G.J. Ashworth, part of the confusion in differentiating conservation and preservation lie in their different uses in American and European contexts, which he states are rendered synonymous in North America ("Conservation as Preservation or as Heritage: Two Paradigms and Two Answers," *Built Environment* 23:2 [1997]: 94). In this project, I will be mostly referring to preservation projects in Thessaloniki and Istanbul, but in this chapter in particular, I will identify some conservation work at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia—like the unveiling of long-covered mosaics—which were enabled, I claim, because of the repurposing of these sites into monuments and museums.

¹⁸ For a summary of these findings, see: Ernest Hébrard, "Les travaux du Service archéologique de l'armée d'Orient à l'arc de triomphe « de Galère » et à l'église Saint-Georges de Salonique (I–VIII)," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 44 (1920): 5–40. For a criticism of Hébrard's restoration work, see: George Velenis, "Some Observations on the Original Form of the Rotonda," *Balkan Studies* 15 (1974): 298–307.

¹⁹ During World War I, Prime Minister Venizelos, who supported the Allied powers, established a parallel administration in Thessaloniki—a second Greek state—in opposition to the official royal government in Athens, who advocated a Germanophile neutrality. This government lasted until June 1917, when the Allied Powers forced Greek King Constantine I to abdicate.

²⁰ Hébrard, "Les travaux du Service archéologique," 6.

(*antiques proportions*).²¹ Hébrard thus grounded the Rotunda's importance not only in its historical context but also in its artistic value.

Danish architect and archaeologist Ejnar Dyggve conducted further excavations in 1939, continuing where Hébrard left off, by extending his study to include the whole of the Galerian complex. His research revealed that the Rotunda lay within a temenos (from the Greek τέμενος, or sacred precinct).²² Within ancient Greece, a temenos was a piece of land reserved for worship, marked off from mundane use and dedicated to a divine being. It acted as a sanctuary, where those therein were divinely protected.²³ Dyggve's discovery would support the argument that the Rotunda was originally intended as a sacred site, as a temple rather than a mausoleum. His excavations also revealed a ceremonial avenue that linked the Arch of Galerius with the Rotunda, reaffirming Hébrard's discovery. This connection, according to archaeologist Theocharis Pazaras, "might mean that the Rotunda had become the official church of the Christian emperor too," further affirming its importance in Christian history.²⁴

The Thessaloniki Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities directed its own archaeological excavation at the Rotunda in 1974. These excavations not only illuminated or contributed to discussions about the original function and use of the ancient site, but they also reaffirmed the historical importance of Thessaloniki, illuminating the city's imperial palace complex and the city's prominent status within the Roman Empire.

²¹ Hébrard, "Les travaux du Service archéologique," 5.

²² See: "The Excavation," *Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City*, n.d. [Online](#).

²³ Andrej Petrovic and Ivana Petrovic, *Inner Purity and Pollution in Greek Religion. Volume 1: Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 28–29.

²⁴ Pazaras, *The Rotunda of Saint George in Thessaloniki*, 25.

The remains unearthed by these sets of excavations are visible to visitors of the Rotunda today. After extensive restoration of the building following an earthquake in 1978, the site formally reopened its doors to the public in 2015. Upon entering the premises, visitors may go through the courtyard, pass the minaret, and walk towards the south entrance of the building, where they will come across a trench filled with ancient columns, bases of columns, and walls of bricks and mortar (Figure 19). Blocked off by a low, thin barrier, the area is covered in grass and other plants, and oftentimes cats can be spotted sleeping in shady areas on hot summer days. There is a metal walkway that goes over a part of the excavation site, giving visitors a better view of the ancient remains. The walkway, which leads southwest, is blocked by a tall metal fence that delimits the Rotunda's property, but visitors still have a good view of the Arch of Galerius and Dimitri Gounari. The path therefore also orients them to make a physical and visual connection between the Rotunda and the Arch, as Hébrard's plan intended.

Information panels along the short walkway situate the importance of the archaeological remains within an early Christian context: "At the excavation site today there are visible architectural building remains associated with the Rotunda's conversion into a Christian church in Early Byzantine times (4th-6th c. AD)" (Figure 20). Excavations have thus been deployed as proof of the Roman and Byzantine character of the Rotunda. Little to no attention is given to its Ottoman phase, though the preservation of Ottoman elements—such as the minaret and tombs—have been an aspect of the monument's stewardship plan, to the chagrin of those Thessalonians who wished to prioritize the Christian layer of the Rotunda (Chapter 4).



Figure 19: Archaeological area to the south end of the Rotunda (2021).



Figure 20: Information panel highlights the architectural shifts that the Rotunda underwent after its conversion into a church (2021).

The conversion of the Rotunda from mosque to monument not only resulted in archaeological excavations, it also permitted previously concealed and damaged Christian art and architectural features to be revealed and preserved once again. The Greek Archaeological Service, for instance, cleaned and preserved the dome's mosaics in 1952 and 1953. The unveiling of the restored mosaics was further testimony to the Rotunda's—and Thessaloniki's—Christian character. However, the site lacked overt Christian markers on the exterior of the building, a point of contention in late-twentieth century debates over the Rotunda (Chapter 4).

Though church services were sporadically permitted at the Rotunda over the course of the twentieth century, the Church needed permission from the site's administration, the Ninth Ephoria of Byzantine Antiquities—an archaeological service—to do so. Thus, in important ways, the site was secularized, where its use, access, and stewardship were controlled by an archaeological body that situated the Rotunda's importance in its Roman, historical context. In other words, preservation was prioritized over the needs of religious communities. This shift would activate dissonant understandings of the Rotunda decades later, when stakeholders found themselves negotiating the boundaries of religious use and ownership at this heritage site. I explore these events in Part II.

Hagia Sophia and Istanbul

Prior to Hagia Sophia's conversion into a museum in the 1930s, the American scholar, archaeologist, and founder of the Byzantine Institute, Thomas Whittemore,

sought permission to uncover the mosque's mosaics.²⁵ Many of them had already been recorded by the Swiss-Italian architects Giuseppe and Gaspare Fossati, who were hired by Sultan Abdülmecid to renovate the building between 1847 and 1849. While cleaning up centuries of soot and plaster, the brothers accidentally came across Byzantine mosaics, which they documented before covering them again in preparation for the reopening of the mosque.²⁶ Whittemore, nearly a century later, hoped to gain access to these replastered mosaics. Though Hagia Sophia still functioned as a mosque at the time, Whittemore was granted permission, and the ensuing conservation work between 1931 and 1934 more permanently removed the plaster from some of the mosaics.²⁷ Historian Thomas F. Madden dramatically describes the events: "Slowly and surely, armed with cameras and a good head for publicity, Whittemore brought the images of forgotten Constantinople to an astonished world."²⁸ There was thus a performative aspect to this preservation work, which highlighted American contributions—with key support from

²⁵ The Byzantine Institute, founded in 1930, was an organization that aimed at preserving Byzantine art and architecture. In 1962, it ended its administrative and fieldwork operations due to insufficient funding, and its assets were transferred to Dumbarton Oaks. Records from the Hagia Sophia conservation project, including notebooks, ground plans, maps, correspondence, and tracings, are kept in the latter's archives. See: "Byzantine Institute," *Dumbarton Oaks*, n.d. [Online](#).

²⁶ Impressed by the beauty of the mosaics, Sultan Abdülmecid is reported to have said: *Elles sont belles, cachez-les pourtant puisque notre religion les défend: cachez-les biens, mais ne les détruisez pas; car qui sait ce qui peut arriver?*; that is, "They are beautiful; hide them, though, as our religion forbids them; hide them well, but do not destroy them because who knows what can happen?" Quoted in Cyril Mango, *Materials for the Study of the Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1962), 140. My translation.

²⁷ According to Whittemore's own words, "Santa Sophia was a mosque the day that I talked to him. The next morning, when I went to the mosque, there was a sign on the door written in [Kemal] Atatürk's own hand. It said: 'The museum is closed for repairs.'" It seems Kemal already had in mind the site's conversion into a museum. Quoted in George Vardas, "Hagia Sophia: From World Heritage Monument to the Mosque of Sultans," *The Acropolis Research Group*, 23 July 2020. [Online](#).

²⁸ Thomas F. Madden, *Istanbul: City of Majesty at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: Viking, 2016), 346.

the Turkish government—to safeguard of the Byzantine works of art, while revealing an important pre-Ottoman layer of Hagia Sophia.

During this time, President Mustafa Kemal and his government considered converting Hagia Sophia into a museum. Kemal set up a commission whose members included directors from the Istanbul Archaeology Museums, Tokapi Museum, and the Ankara Ethnography Museum, as well as the General Director of Pious Foundations, among others.²⁹ As a result, the Ministry of Education requested a decree that would pave the way for converting Hagia Sophia into a museum. Though this decision would run against Ottoman-Islamic endowment law,³⁰ it did not appear to run against the laws of secular Turkey.³¹ The president had already converted Topkapi Palace—the administrative headquarters of the Ottoman sultans—into a museum. Conversion of both sites, among others, would play an important role in creating a break from Turkey’s Ottoman imperial past while also historicizing it, by rendering these sites a relic of the past. Indeed, according to architecture scholar Candaş Bilisel, the aim of Kemal’s support of such projects, including the nation’s many archaeological studies, was to “link the

²⁹ Pınar Aykaç narrates: “After their first meeting, the commission stated that Hagia Sophia was already a museum, and hence interventions should be conducted without destroying its *authentic character*. In saying this, the commission was recognising the entire history of the monument as being valuable enough to be presented as a museum.” In *Sultanahmet, Istanbul’s Historic Peninsula: Musealization and Urban Conservation* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2022), 72. My emphasis.

³⁰ As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, the decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a museum was considered by the Turkish Council of State to be a violation of *waqf*, an Islamic endowment of property to be used for religious or charitable purpose. According to Islamic Relief Worldwide, it is “a special kind of philanthropic deed in perpetuity.” In “Waqf (Endowment),” *Islamic Relief Worldwide*, n.d. [Online](#).

³¹ Or, as Ekrem Buğra Ekinci frames it, “revolution had its own law. [...] Hagia Sophia was converted into a museum according to the laws of the revolution.” In “A Church, a Mosque and Finally a Museum: The Nearly 1,500-Year-Old Story of the Hagia Sophia,” *DailySabah*, 22 May 2015. [Online](#).

Republic of Turkey to the universal history of humanity.”³² Under Kemal’s government, Turkey’s distancing from its Ottoman past had very different motivations than that of Greece. While Greeks interpreted their Ottoman history as life under “the Turkish yoke,”³³ early republican Turks wished to establish themselves as a political regime separate from their backward, imperialist Ottoman predecessors and to cultivate favor with their Western, secular neighbors.

Museums, like monuments, represent important memory work for a society. Starting around the sixteenth century, “cabinets of curiosities” or *Wunderkammern*, were the precursors to European museums. They housed unique and eclectic artifacts, but over time they developed into public institutions. Near the end of the eighteenth century, institutions like the British Museum in London and the Musée du Louvre in Paris made their collections accessible to a general audience.³⁴ These establishments aimed at educating the masses, particularly of the greatness of their own nation and of their shared heritage. The increasingly public nature of museums—many of which represented and interpreted the past so as to cast the nation-state in a favorable light—meant that, by the late nineteenth century, museums, especially state-sponsored ones, were ideological vehicles for nation-states. They became sources of national pride, as they increasingly embodied “the antiquity of the region’s cultural heritage, the legitimacy of the modern

³² Candaş Bilgel, “Shaping a Modern City out of an Ancient Capital: Henri Prost’s Plan for the Historical Peninsula of Istanbul” (11th Conference of the International Planning History Society, Barcelona, 2004).

³³ Greek depictions of this time period are likely exaggerated. Molly Greene’s work is in line with a number of recent publications that reassesses Ottoman rule in Greece, providing a more nuanced picture of Greek experience under this empire. See: *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1453 to 1768: The Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Kelly Richman-Abdou, “How Museums Evolved Over Time from Private Collections to Modern Institutions,” *My Modern Met*, 1 April 2018. [Online](#).

state, and in some instances, evidence of a nation's imperial scope."³⁵ Today, much like monuments, the meaning of public museums' collections and the narratives of the past they impart are subject to changing governments and shifting cultural norms. Controlling society more broadly means controlling a nation's monuments and museums—sites like the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia.

On 24 November 1934, the Turkish Council of Ministers declared that Hagia Sophia would no longer serve as a mosque but as a museum and a “unique architectural monument of art.”³⁶ Like the Rotunda, Hagia Sophia was recognized for its artistic value. The latter was also appreciated within the framework of science—in the sense of wisdom or knowledge, the Greek *sophia* (σοφία), from which Hagia Sophia derives its name. An article in *Milliyet*, a Turkish daily newspaper, stated on 25 March 1935:

Hagia Sophia is converted from a shrine into a museum of science (*bir ilim müzesi*) almost in one day in complete quietness. [...] Since we are aware that our great revolution has generated deep changes in our thoughts, we have considered the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a science museum as a natural outcome.³⁷

It added, “In these times, the only ‘wisdom’ (*hikmet*) that can be recognised as holy can be found in ‘science’ (*ilimde*).”³⁸ This greater emphasis on the arts and

³⁵ Kari A. Zabler, “Syrian National Museums: Regional Politics and the Imagined Community,” in *Contested Cultural Heritage: Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World*, ed. Helaine Silverman (New York: Spring, 2011), 173.

³⁶ The decree states: “Owing to its historical significance, the conversion of Hagia Sophia Mosque in Istanbul—a unique architectural monument—into a museum will gratify the entire Eastern World and will cause humanity to gain a new institution of knowledge [*ilim müessesesi*].” Quoted in and translated from Turkish to English by Ceren Katipoğlu and Çağla Caner-Yüksel, “Hagia Sophia ‘Museum’: A Humanist Project of the Turkish Republic,” in *Constructing Cultural Identity, Representing Social Power*, ed. Candaş Bilsel, Kim Esmark, et al. (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2010).

³⁷ Quoted in and translated from Turkish to English by Katipoğlu and Caner-Yüksel, “Hagia Sophia ‘Museum’.”

³⁸ Quoted in and translated from Turkish to English by Katipoğlu and Caner-Yüksel, “Hagia Sophia ‘Museum’.”

science/knowledge shifted the site's importance away from its religious function and identity. This reorientation in value was also reflected in Hagia Sophia's ownership, which was transferred from General Directorate of Pious Foundations to the Ministry of Education.³⁹

Hagia Sophia Museum opened its doors to the public on 1 February 1935. The carpet that had covered the building's marble floors was removed, revealing long-hidden decorations. The racks for footwear, which visitors must remove before entering the carpeted area of a mosque, were now gone. The mosaics, exposed through the efforts of Whittemore and the Byzantine Institute, were on display for visitors to enjoy. The nineteenth-century madrasa, an Islamic educational institution, was destroyed in order to accommodate further archaeological excavations.⁴⁰ The area between Hagia Sophia and the neighboring Sultan Ahmed Mosque, which consisted of the old maidan, or Great Republic Square, would eventually be cleared, a result of Henri Prost's master plan. According to architecture scholar Ziad Jamaledine, this move "reinforced the reading of Hagia Sophia as a monument to be conserved—what Prost described as 'universal cultural heritage belonging to humanity,'" foreshadowing the kind of language deployed by UNESCO in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴¹

³⁹ Katipoğlu and Caner-Yüksel, "Hagia Sophia 'Museum'," 214.

⁴⁰ Aykaç, *Sultanahmet, Istanbul's Historic Peninsula*, 72.

⁴¹ Ziad Jamaledine, "Hagia Sophia Past and Present," *Places Journal*, August 2020. [Online](#). According to Cànâ Bilsel, Prost is referencing the language used by President Kemal himself: "Atatürk declared that this edifice did not belong to a religion or another, but to the entire humanity, as Prost stresses in his speech at the Institut de France" ("Shaping a Modern City").

Hagia Sophia's conversion was framed as an act of secularization and the building became the embodiment of a secular, modern Turkey.⁴² Though it was a monument to the past, a place in which visitors and citizens were reminded of Istanbul's incredible history, it also was a monument to the present, representing the country's greatness in the here and now, showcased by its ability to overcome sectarian divisions. Its conversion has been widely considered "a symbol of peaceful coexistence,"⁴³ but it could simultaneously be regarded as an attempt to erase or even deny difference through its celebration of a universalized "humanity." As a museum, Hagia Sophia no longer offered an *official* space for religious rituals or use by any religious community—though how visitors engaged with this space, and what religious beliefs informed their visits, are a different matter. However, it also did not offer the well curated objects, panels, and exhibitions that one might expect from a museum.⁴⁴ Rather, the building itself was the object on display. Visitors were invited to appreciate the artistic and architectural merits of the site, such as its Byzantine mosaics, exhibited in situ. Hagia Sophia's importance would be revealed visually, in its material history. Several preservation and archaeological projects

⁴² A name has been given to this ideology—Kemalism. It rests on two central pillars: Turkish national and secularism. Mustafa Akyol writes: "Nationalism implied a nation-state built for Turks, in contrast to the multiethnic Ottoman Empire. And secularism implied that Islam would not be allowed to have any significant public role in this new, modern, Western-oriented republic." In "Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism: Lessons from Turkey's Struggle to Balance Democracy and Laiklik," *The Century Foundation*, 25 April 2019. [Online](#).

⁴³ Merrit Kennedy and Peter Kenyon, "Turkey Converts Istanbul's Iconic Hagia Sophia Back into a Mosque," *NPR*, 10 July 2020. [Online](#).

⁴⁴ A letter dated 25 August 1934 from the Minister of Education, Abidin Özmen, to the Director of the Museums of Antiquities in Istanbul, Aziz Ogan, raises the issue of organizing exhibition spaces and collecting works of art (Katipoğlu and Caner-Yüksel, "Hagia Sophia 'Museum'," 213). Hagia Sophia was to become "a Byzantine and Turkish artefacts museum" (Aykaç, *Sultanahmet, Istanbul's Historic Peninsula*, 73). These plans were never achieved. Some exhibitions have been held in Hagia Sophia over its tenure as a museum, such as Tony Feher's "Nature is Over" in 2003, and some objects within the space include labels, such as the large alabaster urns carved from single blocks of marble. However, overall, the site has not functioned as a more typical museum.

were undertaken around this time, which had the result of better showcasing these vestiges of the past.

This archaeological work throughout the twentieth century not only shed light on Emperor Justinian's sixth-century basilica, but it also revealed Hagia Sophia's previous iterations, namely its Theodosian and Constantinian predecessors. For instance, in the 1930s, German archaeologist Alfons Maria Schneider conducted excavations that uncovered columns and sculptural fragments from both the fourth- and fifth-century churches.⁴⁵ Some of these remains can be seen in the western courtyard of Hagia Sophia today, a kind of open-air exhibition, encountered upon exiting the building towards Caferiye Street (Figure 21). Some objects stand on ground level, in a blocked-off area



Figure 21: Hagia Sophia's western courtyard serves as an open-air exhibition (2021).

⁴⁵ Alfons Maria Schneider, *Die Hagia Sophia zu Konstantinopel* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1939).

near the toilets, and others are located in the exposed excavation trench, such as a frieze of twelve lambs, representing the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. The trench also exposes the foundation of Theodosian's church. As visitors leave Hagia Sophia, they are visually informed that part of the site's complex history resides beneath the building in a previous layer.

President Kemal's secular reforms, including his decision to convert Hagia Sophia, had an important, positive impact on Greek-Turkish relations and in the Balkans more broadly. According to law historian Ekrem Buğra Ekinci, Kemal thought the conversion of Hagia Sophia could help save the Balkan Pact:⁴⁶ "If we convert Hagia Sophia into a museum, it would be a great gesture to Greece."⁴⁷ Greek Prime Minister Venizelos even nominated Kemal for the Nobel Peace Prize, writing: "Under the impulse of the grand reformer, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the absolutist regime of the Sultans was abolished, and the state became openly secular. The whole nation rushed towards progress, deservedly ambitious to be at the forefront of civilized peoples."⁴⁸

Kemal's successor in 1938, Mustafa İsmet İnönü, allowed for multiparty elections and, in 1950, there was a peaceful power transition to the Democrat Party after the

⁴⁶ The Balkan Pact was a treaty signed by Greece, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia in 1934. It aimed at maintaining the geopolitical status quo in the region following the end of the First World War. Signatories agreed to suspend all disputed territorial claims against one another.

⁴⁷ Ekinci, "A Church, a Mosque and Finally a Museum."

⁴⁸ My translation. The original reads: *Sous l'impulsion du grand réformateur, Moustapha Kemal Pacha, le régime absolutiste des Sultans fut aboli, et l'état devint franchement laïque. La nation toute entière s'élançait vers le progrès, ambitieuse, à juste titre, de figurer à l'avant garde des peuples civilisés.* See: N. Lygeros, "L'erreur du jugement de Vénizelos en 1934," *Lygeros.org*, 25 December 2015. [Online](#).

Republican People's Party—founded by Kemal—lost in the general election.⁴⁹ This shift has been presented as evidence that a majority of Turks opposed Kemalist secularism.⁵⁰ It was also around this time that Prost was dismissed from his role as urban planner of Istanbul. Center-right political parties ruled in the second half of the twentieth century, which did not outright challenge Turkey's secularism but “only advocated, and tried to implement, a more religion-friendly secularism.”⁵¹ Hagia Sophia thus remained a museum, though there was popular resistance to its secular status, especially in the immediate aftermath of President Adnan Menderes's win in the 1950 national elections. These calls weakened but would grow louder again at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The historical significance of this ancient site was recognized throughout the rest of the century. In 1985, certain areas of the city of Istanbul were selected for UNESCO World Heritage status, incorporated under the designation “Historic Areas of Istanbul.” This World Heritage site consists of four areas: the Archaeological Park (which includes Hagia Sophia), Suleymaniye quarter, Zeyrek area, and the area along the Theodosian walls. Within these areas, several sites are listed alongside Hagia Sophia: the Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, hippodrome of Constantine, aqueduct of Valens, St. Irene, and the former Church of the Holy Saviour of Chora, among others. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, Istanbul's “Outstanding Universal Value” lies “in its unique integration of

⁴⁹ The nation's one-party period—ruled by the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or Republican People's Party—lasted between the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the establishment of the *Millî Kalkınma Partisi*, or National Development Party, in 1945.

⁵⁰ Aykol writes: “The majority of Turks voted over and over again against staunchly secularist candidates.” In “Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism.”

⁵¹ Aykol, “Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism.”

architectural masterpieces that reflect the meeting of Europe and Asia over many centuries, and in its incomparable skyline formed by the creative genius of Byzantine and Ottoman architects.”⁵² This listing celebrates the city’s multilayered history, with a focus on its Byzantine and Ottoman periods. A remarkable change can thus be seen between the 1930s, when the leaders of the new Republic of Turkey wished to distance themselves from their Ottoman past, and the second half of the twentieth century, when Turkish officials applied for UNESCO listing to celebrate that very history. This increasing embrace of Ottoman history has continued today under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, though in ways that wish to reinvolve the greatness of a bygone imperial power. The meaning of heritage places, and the place given to religion, is thus both negotiable and political.

As this section has demonstrated, several preservation measures and archaeological projects occurred at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia following their new shared status as monuments and museums. Though some restoration projects had taken place at these sites prior to their twentieth-century conversions, their new statuses, I argue, not only prioritized preservation of these sites but also reoriented the types of conservation and archaeological work that could take place.

A focus on these two sites is indicative of how shifts in status can place new emphasis on conservation work as well as tourism. When (formerly) religious sites become the stewardship responsibility of the state and/or heritage professionals, attention is oftentimes oriented *away* from preserving a site so as to ensure its ongoing religious

⁵² “Historic Areas of Istanbul,” *UNESCO*, n.d. [Online](#).

use *to* preserving it for the sake of future generations of believers and non-believers alike to appreciate—in ways that oftentimes circumscribe religious engagements. That is, heritage preservation may actually be about preserving the *site itself* for posteriority, prioritizing an object-focused rather than community-focused practice.

Furthermore, restoration interventions at secularized sites reveal different palimpsestic layers, allowing symbols from different religious traditions to coexist within the same space. New statuses may result in different pockets of money becoming available for preservation, whether from the nation-state or from international preservation organizations like UNESCO.⁵³ Thus, heritage status, recognized through the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia's conversion into monuments and museums, as well as their later UNESCO recognition, did important work in preserving these sites and opening them up to a wider community of visitors. In many other ways, however, their new identities also invited destructive forces.

Destruction

When a religious site is officially recognized as a part of a nation's—or humanity's—heritage, positive and negative changes result, both for the site itself and for the communities of users or local residents who become directly impacted. In this

⁵³ Despite this increased financial support, conservation issues may continue to plague ancient sites. This is especially true with Hagia Sophia. Concerns include the building's ability to withstand severe damage or collapse from earthquakes (Istanbul, which is close to the North Anatolian fault—a boundary between two major tectonic plates—is very prone to earthquakes), its peeling and flaking ceiling, grime-encrusted marble panels, the restoration and protection of mosaics, among many others. Robert Ousterhout has voiced his frustration regarding the work done at the site: "Old buildings like Hagia Sophia are ignored until there's an emergency. They're put back together and then forgotten about until the next emergency. Meanwhile, there is a continual deterioration." Quoted in Fergus M. Bordewich, "A Monumental Struggle to Preserve Hagia Sophia," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2008. [Online](#). See also: Murat Sofuoğlu, "Is Istanbul Headed for Another Big Earthquake?" *TRT World*, 31 January 2020. [Online](#).

section, I explore the more destructive aspects of heritage-making practices. I begin with two of the most oft-cited issues identified in heritage scholarship—tourism and historical “freezing”—before turning to concerns related to the shifting religious identity and use of heritage sites. The latter set of issues is not as widely addressed in the literature, but as this project aims to demonstrate, modifications in religious rituals and access may play an important role in activating dissonance at heritage sites. It is therefore crucial to identify what is lost, or what is destroyed, when religious sites are made into secularized heritage.

First, tourism tends to increase when a site is recognized and marketed as part of a nation’s heritage. For instance, there has been debate in both scholarship and public forums as to whether UNESCO listing promotes tourism;⁵⁴ EUROPARC Consulting, a company that developed the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, argues that World Heritage status does not automatically increase tourism, but such designation can and does boost tourism when it is strategically used as a marketing tool.⁵⁵ Although tourism is not the primary aim of World Heritage status—rather, it is the protection and sustainability of sites—it does seem to be a consequence of it. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has itself recognized the negative impact that tourism has had on listed sites, identifying it as the second biggest threat to a heritage

⁵⁴ Takamitsu Jimura, for instance, finds that there was a large increase in tourists after the Japanese village Ogimachi received UNESCO World Heritage status, officially listed as “Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama (“The Impact of World Heritage Site Designation on Local Communities – A Case Study of Ogimachi, Shirakawa-Mura, Japan,” *Tourism Management* 32 [2011]: 288–296). PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, on the other hand, in their study of six World Heritage sites in the United Kingdom, write: “our research shows that the impact WHS [World Heritage Site] status makes on visitor motivations is usually very marginal and there is little evidence that becoming a WHS automatically generates additional visitors” (quoted in EUROPARC Consulting, “The Implications of World Heritage Status for Planning and Managing Tourism in the Wadden Sea” [Research Report, December 2011], 7).

⁵⁵ EUROPARC Consulting states: “the mere designation of an area as a World Heritage site has rather little impact: what matters is how World Heritage status is used.” In “The Implications of World Heritage Status,” 3.

site, after development. Ironically, as a site receives this status in order to highlight the value of preserving it for future generations, this listing simultaneously places the site at greater risk from visitors who may want to see it precisely because of its special designation. Through their visit, tourists place additional pressures on the fabric of the site and its surrounding environment, such as through increased traffic congestion or trash accumulation.⁵⁶ This dynamic, which architecture scholar Soonki Kim identifies as a “double-edged sword,” can be clearly seen at Hagia Sophia.⁵⁷ Prior to its reconversion into a mosque, the site—contending with Topkapi Palace as the top tourist destination in Turkey—drew in about three million visitors a year.⁵⁸ These numbers were welcomed by shopkeepers who depend on tourists for income, but the environmental impact of increased visitors, especially during important holidays, was tangible, with the park area between Hagia Sophia and Sultan Ahmed Mosque filling up with litter and overflowing trash bins.

Second, a site that becomes a monument or museum may become “frozen” in a particular historical period. This status discourages heritage places from changing or adapting to contemporary needs.⁵⁹ Indeed, because modifications generally cannot be

⁵⁶ This is not to suggest that non-UNESCO sites, or religious sites that have not undergone similar secularization transformations, do not experience preservation stresses from large numbers of visitors. Pilgrimage is a good example of how visitors—regardless of their motives (religious or not)—are always of concern when in large numbers.

⁵⁷ Soonki Kim, “World Heritage Site Designation Impacts on a Historic Village: A Case Study on Residents’ Perceptions of Hahoe Village (Korea),” *Sustainability* 8:258 (2016): 1–16.

⁵⁸ “The Most Visited Museums of Turkey: Hagia Sophia Museum,” *Republic of Turkey Governorship of Istanbul*, 12 March 2020. [Online](#). It remains unclear what impact the former’s conversion into a mosque will have on visitor numbers, as the site has already seen decreased visitor numbers in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵⁹ UNESCO has delisted or threatened to delist some World Heritage sites because modernization has threatened or undermined their preservation. For instance, Dresden Elbe Valley in Germany lost its status in 2009 because a four-lane bridge was built “in the heart of the cultural landscape which meant the

made to them, these sites stop evolving and effectively remain stuck in a particular point in time.⁶⁰ Such an approach to preservation oftentimes assumes that a specific historical moment represented the authentic, universal value of the site, which should not be disrupted by modern developments. Though a secularized religious site may visibly change when it is converted—through excavations pits, the removal of objects for religious rituals (such as the carpets that would have adorned the floors of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia when they were mosques), and the uncovering of plastered works of art—in general, new additions cannot be made to the site, unless these are easily removable or help service the site as a tourist destination, such as the installation of gift shops. This is certainly an issue that has been raised at the Rotunda, where some residents of Thessaloniki wish to see a cross added to the top of the building in order to signal its former use as a church. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, a cross adorned the building until the 1950s, when it was removed in order to highlight its Roman identity.

This frozen state is oftentimes exacerbated with a site's inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Marco D'Eramo's 2014 article "Unescocide" discusses some of the devastating effects of such a status, including how it negatively impacts local

property failed to keep its 'outstanding universal value as inscribed'" ("Dresden is Deleted from UNESCO's World Heritage List," *UNESCO*, 25 June 2009. [Online](#)). Likewise, Liverpool, listed as "Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City," was delisted in 2021 for similar reasons. New constructions were regarded as "detrimental to the site's authenticity and integrity" ("World Heritage Committee Deleted Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City from UNESCO's World Heritage List," *UNESCO*, 21 July 2021. [Online](#)).

⁶⁰ Indeed, even adapting a site for accessibility purposes can be a difficult undertaking. The Acropolis in Athens, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a good example. The uphill route to the historic site was notoriously difficult for visitors in wheelchairs to access. Some criticized the amount of concrete used to create a new network of footpaths. For instance, leader of the Official Opposition, Alexis Tsipras demanded the conservative government "stop abusing our cultural heritage." Countering this opposition, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis stated: "This is a project for the whole world and, under normal circumstances, it should unite us all." Quoted in Deborah Kyvikosios, "Greece Faces Row Over Wheelchair Pathway at Acropolis," *Reuters*, 9 June 2021. [Online](#).

populations who are either forced to live elsewhere, or who must live by a site which can never develop.⁶¹ Similar is Helaine Silverman's concept of *ruinscape*, "the administrative perception of inert monuments and the associated policy of privileging 'ruins' on a landscape even though their space is simultaneously occupied by a living population."⁶² In other words, the preservation of heritage sites may lead to a prioritizing of inanimate objects over the lives of human beings.⁶³

Both of these criticisms get to the human aspect of heritage, something that can oftentimes be forgotten in the industry. Whilst the management of heritage aims to preserve a site for the benefit of future societies, it oftentimes causes issues for people in the present, especially for those who use or live near the site under question, thus leading to conflict between different stakeholder groups. There may be economic benefits for local communities, but heritage-making practices can simultaneously be a damaging force, as this section illustrated. In what follows, I consider the unique particularities of *religious sites*, by identifying the ways in which religious engagement with the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, and other secularized religious sites more broadly, is negatively impacted by heritage status.

⁶¹ Marco d'Eramo, "UNESCOcide," trans. Nicholas Dines, *New Left Review* 88 (2014): 47–53.

⁶² Helaine Silverman, "The Ruinscape: UNESCO, the State, and the Construction of Identity and Heritage in Phimai, Thailand" in *Finding Solutions for Protecting and Sharing Archaeological Heritage Resources*, ed. Anne P. Underhill and Lucy C. Salazar (Cham and New York: Springer, 2016), 41. On the other hand, however, heritage status and its related increase in tourism, can be a form of revenue for local communities. If tourism to site increases as a result of a site's heritage status, then local communities will be impacted and this can lead to more employment. This adds another layer of complexity as to whether heritage status is inherently positive or negative for local communities.

⁶³ Heritage sites, as heritage specialist Myra Shackley puts it, are "space[s] to be preserved rather than used, to be gazed upon but not changed."⁶³ In "Space, Sanctity and Service: The English Cathedral as *Heterotopia*," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 4 (2002): 350.

When a religious site is made into a monument or museum, and religious practices and rituals are regulated or prohibited, people can no longer engage with the space as they once may have. This shift, I argue, presents an actual loss to real people and communities. They may become constrained in *when* they can engage with the sites, restricted to particular opening hours. Previously, they may have had much more open access, as is typically the case, for instance, with mosques, which are intended to always be open for the faithful to worship in. At heritage sites where religious engagements are publicly permitted, residents may find they are limited to specific areas of the building that have been carved out for religious use, or to specific hours of the day—otherwise they may find themselves having to “pay to pray”⁶⁴ through entrance fees.

People may also become restricted in *how* they can experience the site. The sense of sound, touch, smell, sight, and even taste becomes regulated or muted when heritage places are prioritized as museum sites. Museums are oftentimes intended to be quiet spaces for contemplating the historical significance and artistic value of its content.⁶⁵ Some religious spaces, such as Protestant churches, are used in this way as well. But other types of churches, such as in the Coptic Christian or Orthodox traditions, or other types of religious buildings, like mosques, can be loud, busy spaces. Minimizing sound

⁶⁴ Myra Shackley, quoted in Daniel H. Olsen, “Management Issues for Religious Heritage Attractions,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 104.

⁶⁵ The interpretation of religious objects within museum contexts, Crispin Paine argues, oftentimes “favours a credal, intellectual understanding of religion, rather than a sensorial, emotional, experiential one, which is how the overwhelming majority of believers actually consume religion and its objects.” In *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 109.

within the museum context may be a means to enable visitors to achieve the right mindset for appreciating heritage sites via their complex, layered histories.

The auditory landscape of secularized religious sites—or more specifically, their lack of or minimal sound—is especially perceptible. As I discussed in Chapter 1, soundscapes are an important identity marker for religious groups, where the sounds of church bells oftentimes go hand-in-hand with the absence of the *adhān*, or call to prayer, and vice versa, signaling which religious group rules the urban landscape. The absence of the *adhān* from the minarets of Hagia Sophia after its conversion into a museum, for instance, would have produced a noticeable, audible change in how the site was used. The privation of sound can therefore be a political marker; in this case, a testament to Turkey’s secularization.

Religious behavior like the touching and kissing of icons and other artifacts can be detrimental to the preservation of ancient objects, and therefore physical contact with them may be circumscribed as a result. Objects may be removed or made harder to access, placed behind a barrier like a rope or protective case, in turn transforming them into exhibitionary or discursive objects rather than ritual props.⁶⁶ The secularization of religious sites also brings a change in rituals, where the smells and tastes associated with some religious services, such as the burning of incense or the consumption of wine and wafer in communion practices at Christian churches, are now absent. Without access to

⁶⁶ Religious objects essentially undergo museumification processes, where their entry into a museum context may change “the meaning of icons or statues of the gods from sacred to aesthetic [...] or simply as cultural and historical evidence.” In Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*, 1.

such objects and rituals, worshippers can no longer participate in the habitual practices and communal relations that inculcate religious “moods and motivations.”⁶⁷

In other words, the secularization of a religious site can delimit processes of subject and community formation. Rather than thinking of religious experience as those “of individual men in their solitude,”⁶⁸ a position that has been thoroughly critiqued in the study of religion, the religious subject should be considered as “an amalgamation of body and society.”⁶⁹ Thus, when secular shifts circumscribe the ways individuals emotionally and sensorially engage with religious buildings and the communities that form around them, there can be loss or even destruction of an important—if not central—aspect of their identity.

The transformation of religious sites into monuments and museums can mark their “demise as a living, social organism[s].”⁷⁰ Indeed, heritage-making practices have often been associated with the destruction of a “real” or “living” spirit of a site. Kevin Walsh, for instance, defines heritagization as “the reduction of *real places to tourist space*, constructed by the selective quotation of images of many different pasts which

⁶⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

⁶⁸ James William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 34.

⁶⁹ Constance M. Furey, “Body, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 8:1 (2021): 8. She makes this statement in the context of Peter Brown’s groundbreaking book, *The Body and Society*. However, she does criticize this amalgamation for being an incomplete picture of the religious subject, who emerges “alone in a crowd, participating in communal rituals, subject to religious authorities and disciplinary practices, but oddly detached from intimate relationships” (10).

⁷⁰ Nelson, “Tourists, Terrorists, and Metaphysical Theater,” 74. Nelson makes this statement in the context of Hagia Sophia, but I broaden his remark to other secularized religious sites.

more often than not contribute to the destruction of actual places.”⁷¹ Rodney Harrison, referring to Walsh’s definition, rephrases it to be “the process by which objects and places are transformed from functional ‘things’ into objects of display and exhibition.”⁷² Harrison removes the language of “real” or “actual,” and instead reframes heritagization to be the removal of the *functional* aspect of objects, sites, and landscapes. These “things” are now valued not because of their function but through their display and representation. Rather than being a site of lived religious experiences, secularized sites become sites of memory instead.⁷³

Ultimately, when sites of religious practice like Hagia Sophia are secularized, the more sensuous, emotional, and embodied ways of experiencing the space are now spatially and conceptually circumscribed. In turn, I argue, this process reframes for visitors what religion looks like. Religious sites become spaces for contemplating buildings rather than the people who made these buildings meaningful through their religious engagements and experiences.

The secularization of religious sites may be a means for assuaging conflict, especially where there are complex histories of repurposing, like at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia. This act removes ownership from a particular religious community, in theory giving access to a broader audience.⁷⁴ It can also be a way of celebrating a site’s

⁷¹ Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 4. My emphasis.

⁷² Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2013), 69.

⁷³ Referring to Hagia Sophia’s conversion into a museum, Nuh Yılmaz writes that the building transformed into “an artifact of the past.” In “Hagia Sophia,” in *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Alan Masters (New York: Facts On File, 2009), 245.

⁷⁴ Certain religious sites that have been made into heritage places, such as Mt. Athos in Greece or Okinoshima in Japan, two UNESCO World Heritage sites, have not become more accessible with listing.

many layers of history, thus reorienting its importance away from how one community uses and appreciates it to a more universal valuation. Secularization as a peace-keeping act certainly seems to have played a role in President Kemal's decision to convert Hagia Sophia into a museum, as I noted earlier. There is therefore an internal conflict in heritage-making. It creates conflict even as it tries to assuage or silence it. At the same time, and as this chapter has sought to demonstrate, this practice invites destructive forces as it tries to preserve these vestiges of the past.

Sacred Secular Heritage

This chapter has suggested some of the ways in which secularization and heritage-making practices intersected at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia in the twentieth century. Now I turn to the ways in which *sacralization* also played an important role in how these sites were understood. In what follows, I interrogate the ways in which heritage-making and sacred-making practices intersect, in order to argue that heritage discourse is inherently *both* secularizing and sacralizing.

When government officials declared the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia to be loci of heritage by converting them into monuments and museums, they set these sites apart from others in the city, in turn rendering them *sacred*. This concept refers to interpretations or understandings that define something as special, as “extraordinary,” set apart in some way from the profane, or the everyday. Heritage status, I argue, renders

Women, for instance, are still unable to visit them. For Mt. Athos, see: Veronica della Dora, “Setting and Blurring Boundaries: Pilgrims, Tourists, and Landscape in Mount Athos and Meteora,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 39:2 (2012): 951–974. For Okinoshima, see: Aike P. Rots, “World Heritage, Secularisation, and the New ‘Public Sacred’ in East Asia,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 8:1–3 (2019): 151–178.

historical sites into sacred places.⁷⁵ It does so through processes of sacralization, which involve selection, demarcation, ritualization, among other practices.⁷⁶ Experts such as archaeologists, art historians, conservators, and urbanists authenticate a site's special status through the publication and dissemination of archaeological reports, political briefs, or academic texts. The information provided marks a site or object as worthy of preservation, and in order to convince others of this special value, such as potential investors or tourists, religious and sacralizing language is deployed to frame and elevate the site or object as exceptional.⁷⁷ For instance, Greek discourse framed the safeguarding of antiquities, called "sacred heirlooms," as a "sacred duty."⁷⁸ Indeed, Greeks even applied religious terminology to present the economic value of antiquities: They "will

⁷⁵ Of course, this is *not* to say that heritage objects and sites become *religious* once again. Rather, more in line with Émile Durkheim's understanding of the sacred, such resources are separated out from everyday goods and protected through an acknowledged interdiction that delimited access and use. For instance, consider art galleries. Most visitors understand that touching art pieces is strictly off limits in these spaces. This circumscription thus both sacralizes and secularizes cultural artifacts. See: *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin and New York: Macmillan Company, 1915).

⁷⁶ Adrian Ivakhiv, "Toward a Geography of 'Religion': Mapping the Distribution of an Unstable Signifier," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96:1 (2006): 171.

⁷⁷ Indeed, it appears heritage discourse, as well as the scholarship that studies it, are ripe with religious and sacred terminology. For instance, scholars have characterized museum visitors as participants in ritualized actions, who have made "pilgrimages" to see far-off museums in order to experience "transcendence" before their collections, and museums have been analogized as the new churches of society by many commentators, including philosopher Alain de Botton (*Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* [London and New York: Hamish Hamilton, 2012]). Paine writes: "museums used a very similar language to that of the churches. Beauty, whether in works of art or of nature, was elevated to a divine principle, whose contemplation improved the soul. Museums used—indeed, they still use—the language of faith, even of mission, to describe their efforts not only to improve the lot of the poor, but to improve society itself" (*Religious Objects in Museums*, 75). See also: Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995); James Robson, "Faith in Museums: On the Confluence of Museums and Religious Sites in Asia," *Modern Language Association* 125:1 (2010): 121–128.

⁷⁸ These are the words used by Minister for Church Affairs and Public Education, Athanasios Eftaxias in 1899. Quoted in Daphne Voudari, "Greek Legislation Concerning the International Movement of Antiquities and Its Ideological and Political Dimensions," in *A Singular Antiquity: Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth-Century Greece*, ed. Dimitris Damaskos and Dimitris Plantzos (Athens: Benaki Museum, 2008), 126.

turn Greece into an object of pilgrimage for all the civilized peoples and will in this way prove not only objects of honour and veneration, but also a source of wealth for our country.”⁷⁹

Over time, the historical, cultural, religious, and even political significance of a site or object becomes enshrined, even through quotidian activities such as the compilation of lists,⁸⁰ and its value comes to be seen as unquestionable and authentic—that is, sacred.⁸¹ Indeed, its perceived authenticity is what attracts visitors.⁸² They travel to these “must-see” sights, sometimes journeying very long distances to do so. Sightseeing, sociologist Dean MacCannell explains, is a progressive, ritualistic development, whereby tourists move from marker to marker—which typically start offsite (such as postcards, advertisements, etc.) and then move onsite when tourists travel to the destination (such as signposts, plaques, etc.)—until they reach and behold the

⁷⁹ Eftaxias, quoted in Voudari, “Greek Legislation,” 126–127.

⁸⁰ Lists, inventories, descriptions, and other forms of documentation judge and officially declare something to be heritage. As such, the site becomes a part of a nation or humanity’s canon of heritage places. Much like canon within a religious context refers to a collection or list of sacred books deemed genuine and authoritative, so, too, do nation-states and international organizations like UNESCO create canons of heritage. These lists in themselves seem to have sacralizing powers. According to Rots, UNESCO status can lead to a “secular re-enchantment” of heritage sites (“World Heritage, Secularisation, and the New ‘Public Sacred’”).

⁸¹ Marleen de Witte and Birgit Meyer note the intersection of sacrality and authenticity, writing: “certain heritage forms become imbued with a sacrality that makes them appear powerful, authentic, or even incontestable.” In “Heritage and the Sacred,” *Material Religion* 9:3 (2013): 277.

⁸² Authenticity is what the tourist expects to find in the presence of the sight itself. Authentic experiences of tourist attractions, Dean MacCannell argues, are those residing outside the everyday. That is, such destinations provide an authenticity the tourist feels is lacking in their modern world. This conceptualization of “outside the everyday” recalls Victor Turner’s theorizing of pilgrimage as a liminal phenomenon—one that exists outside of everyday social structures and social roles. See: Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, 3rd Ed. (Berkeley, Calif. and London: University of California Press, 2013); Victor Turner, “The Center Out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,” *History of Religions* 12:3 (1973): 191–230.

“sight,” the heritage place.⁸³ Once there, visitors engage in a number of ritualistic behaviors that determine how they experience the site. The ways in which they move around in the space, which may be regulated by security guards or tour guides, and what areas are accessible or restricted oftentimes provide a formulaic visitor experience. Furthermore, some of these habitual behaviors have the intended effect of confirming their participation in the ritual—such as photographs of a visitor pretending to hold up the Leaning Tower of Pisa or the purchase of souvenirs as mementos. As ritual spaces, heritage sites are places that have been marked off as separate in specific ways, thus affirming their sacred quality.

As religious sites, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia were of course already deemed sacred amongst Christian and Muslim communities. What changed is that this sacredness was oriented away from a religious context to a secular one. Heritage status thus marks both continuity and discontinuity: a site continues to be sacred but it is a different kind of sacrality. By restricting religious use of and access to the sites while celebrating their historical, cultural, and artistic value, officials were converting these sites into *sacred secular places*.⁸⁴ Though heritage-making has been argued to be an inherently

⁸³ I use the language of heritage sites whereas MacCannell uses sight to refer to tourist attractions.

⁸⁴ In a way, a religious building that becomes a secularized heritage site loses its “cult value.” According to Walter Benjamin a religious artifact exhibits cult value through its lack of access: “Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level” (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000], 678). When that artifact enters a museum’s collections, it loses this value in favor for its increased “exhibition value,” created for the spectators’ appreciation. Heritage-making practices, I argue, have a similar effect.

secularizing act,⁸⁵ the above demonstrates its strong sacralizing power.⁸⁶ As this chapter has contended, by creating sacred secular places out of religious heritage, government officials and heritage managers simultaneously introduced destructive forces even as their aim was to preserve this heritage. This dynamic, as Chapter 4 reveals, activates forms of ideological dissonance at these sites, calling into question the boundaries between religious and secular practices at heritage places today.

⁸⁵ For instance, HERILIGION, a European project that seeks to understand what happens to religious sites when they are heritagized, states that heritage “involves an explicitly secular gaze predicated on non-transcendent [*sic*] principles – historical, cultural, aesthetic.” In “The Heritagization of Religion and Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe,” *HERLIGION*, n.d. [Online](#).

⁸⁶ This connection between heritage-making and sacred-making practices may be grounded in the inception of heritage as a concept. Jean-Pierre Babelon and André Chastel argue that, at least within the Western world, the concept of cultural heritage in part stems from a Christian religious context, as evidenced by the Christian idea of a sacred inheritance of faith and in the Roman Catholic clergy’s preservation of sacred relics. See: *La notion de patrimoine* (Paris: L. Levi, 1994).

Both religious and non-religious objects and sites are susceptible to the sacralizing effects of heritage-making discourses. David Chidester and Edward Tabor Linenthal, for instance, have shown how non-religious sites that are deemed sacred in the United States, like Mount Rushmore or Independence Hall, are closely linked to the nation. See: *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Part II: The Present

Introduction

From a Western perspective, the world has been understood to trend towards secularization. The transformation of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia into museums would seem to align with the secularization theory proposed by some of the most renowned sociologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. Broadly, this theory suggested that as societies modernize, they become less and less religious. It was evidenced by, among other things, the declining influence of institutionalized religions, the decreased participation of the faithful in religious services, and the disappearing notion of the sacred. The world had become *disenchanted*, to use Weber's term.¹ The theory assumed that people in the past were significantly more religious than they are today; that there was the Age of Faith, in which "the world was filled with the sacred,"² but that this period gave way to the Age of Reason.³ Secularism and modernity were viewed as deeply intertwined, with modernization resulting in secularization.⁴ The theory of secularization became so popular, so widely accepted, that sociologist Jeffrey Hadden, writing in the 1980s,

¹ In *The Sociology of Religion* (1920), Max Weber argued that scientific methods and enlightened reason had demystified the world, thus rendering theological and supernatural accounts of the world less plausible. As a result, religion was devalued and the world lost its mystery and richness. He termed this process "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*). See: *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

² C. Wright Mills, summarizing Talcott Parsons' *The Social System*. Quoted in Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory," *Social Forces* 65:3 (1987): 598.

³ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge note how the Enlightenment period brought about the first anticipations of religion's death in society. In *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1985), 1.

⁴ Secularism refers to the philosophy or state policy, whereas secularization refers to the process for enacting this philosophy or policy.

accused the idea of having itself become “*sacralized*”—that is, taken as self-evident, or an unquestionable doctrine of truth.⁵

However, as many scholars have convincingly argued in the second half of the twentieth century, especially from the 1980s onwards, the secularization theory fails on many accounts. A central challenge to this theory critiques the conflation of the apparent *loss* of religion’s role in modern societies and actual *changes* in the function of religion. For sociologist of religion Mark Chaves, secularization should be conceptualized not as the waning of religion per se, but as the decline of *religious authority*.⁶ In a similar vein, William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano note that the current trend is perhaps more about *de-Christianization* than secularization.⁷ Even among empirical studies which aim to measure this decreased religiosity, none support a slide from “a peak of sacrality into a valley of secularity.”⁸ José Casanova challenges the notion that modernization leads to secularization.⁹ Historian C. John Sommerville’s comment that “we may not be looking in the right place for it” helpfully highlights that religion and the sacred may still be

⁵ Hadden, “Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory,” 588. Emphasis in the original.

⁶ Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces* 72 (1994): 749–774.

⁷ William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano, “Introduction — Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept,” *Sociology of Religion* 60:3 (1999): 223.

⁸ Swatos and Christiano, “Introduction — Secularization Theory,” 216. See also: Peter L. Berger, “Secularism in Retreat,” *The National Interest* 46 (1996): 3–12.

⁹ José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 16. However, Casanova affirms that secularization is a *fait accompli* in most western European countries. Instead, he writes, “What has been questioned by recent global religious developments is the teleological projection of European secularization *onto the rest of the world*” (4). My emphasis.

found in other areas of society.¹⁰ Sometimes one does not even have to search for it. Countries such as Turkey, which embraced religion after a period of secularization, attest to the theory's weaknesses.

Of course, part of the problem with the secularization theory lies in defining what we are referring to when we talk about religion.¹¹ How do we know when something falls under the domain of religion, or when something is religious? This is an important question because of the ways in which terms like “religious,” “sacred,” or “secular” are deployed in the conflicts over the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. How religion has been defined effects our understanding of how its form and expressions are negotiated through heritage sites today. In other words, the domain of heritage provides a critical lens to sift through the shifting nature of religion and the sacred today.

The quest to define religion—to locate its essence—has been taken up by many scholars, perhaps most famously by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose definition has been repeatedly adopted, adapted, and critiqued. Religion, for Geertz, is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.¹²

¹⁰ C. John Sommerville, “Secular Society/Religious Population: Our Tacit Rules for Using the Term ‘Secularization’,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37 (1998): 253.

¹¹ Or, as Swatos and Christiano put it: “*secularization*, secularity, or the secular *is always relative* to some definition of *religion* or the religious.” In “Introduction — Secularization Theory,” 213. Emphasis in the original.

¹² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

As he understands it, religion is a symbolic system: interrelated symbols merge—through ritual, he notes later—an ethos (“long-lasting moods”) with a worldview (“general order of existence”). Religion’s symbols represent the way things are (“models of”) and guide human activity (“models for”).

Scholars have often critiqued the definition as reductionist. Anthropologist Talal Asad is among them; he specifically takes issue with using transhistorical definitions of religion more broadly, arguing that such definitions are impractical and wrong because they are always the product of a historically-specific moment.¹³ For instance, Asad accuses Geertz of placing individual belief at the core of his treatment of religion. Such a conception, however, is the product of a Protestant, post-Enlightenment society. Thus, this definition is not of a transhistorical and universal religion, but rather a modern, individualized Christian one.¹⁴ When approaching sites like the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, in which Orthodox Christian and Sunni Muslim communities use the space, we must be cognizant of the diverse, context-specific ways in which heritage-making practices can affect the religious subject.

Countless alternative definitions have been offered. They run the gamut of possibilities, as suggested by cultural theorist Adrian Ivakhiv: “We may choose to define religion as worship of a deity or superhuman entity or power, or as a moral system arising from narratives about such superhuman figures or as a system of ritual or cultic practice

¹³ Talal Asad writes: “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.

¹⁴ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 28.

that provides an organized community with a sense of social solidarity.”¹⁵ The type of definition offered by a scholar is necessarily informed by their area of study. In the late eighteenth century, theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher provided an affective definition of religion, identifying its essence not as “thinking or acting, but intuition and feeling,”¹⁶ that is, “the feeling of absolute dependence.”¹⁷ Similarly, in the nineteenth century, theologian Rudolf Otto was interested in the non-rational, awe-inspiring aspect of religious experiences, that which cannot be captured by language. He argued that the holy can only be approached indirectly, through numinous encounters, in which humans sense they are in the presence of an awesome, wholly other presence.¹⁸ For theologian Paul Tillich, religion was a reasoned response to existential questions of “ultimate concern.”¹⁹

Scholars in the social sciences framed religion in social, economic, and psychological terms. In the nineteenth century, anthropologist E.B. Tylor provided a

¹⁵ Adrian Ivakhiv, “Toward a Geography of ‘Religion’: Mapping the Distribution of an Unstable Signifier,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96:1 (2006): 170.

¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22. Originally published in 1799 under the German title: *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*.

¹⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 19. Originally published in 1830 under the German title: *Der Christliche Glaube*. Walter A. Kaufman criticizes Schleiermacher for projecting his own religion (Lutheranism) in his definition (*Critique of Religion and Philosophy* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990 (1958)], 102). For a discussion whether the German *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl* should be translated as “absolute feeling of dependence,” see: Georg Behrens, “‘Feeling of Absolute Dependence’ or ‘Absolute Feeling of Dependence’? A Question Revisited,” *Religious Studies* 41:1 (2005): 81–94.

¹⁸ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1923). Originally published in 1917 under the German title: *Das Heilige - Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*.

¹⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

minimalist definition, reducing religion to “the belief in Spiritual Beings” and providing a hierarchical classification system in which animism (the belief that all things possess a distinct spiritual essence, or *anima*) was the first phase in the development of religions.²⁰ Karl Marx—philosopher, historian, economist, sociologist, and political theorist—famously defined religion as “the opium of the people” (*das Opium des Volks*), a tool of social control used by capitalist societies to perpetuate inequality.²¹ He viewed religion as a conservative force which preserved the status quo, an argument that feminist scholar Simone de Beauvoir would echo in the twentieth century.²² Sociologist Max Weber, on the other hand, wrote that religion could be a force for social change.²³ Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud posited that religion was the unconscious mind’s need for wish fulfillment, where people choose to believe in God—the ultimate father-figure—in order to absolve themselves of their own guilt.²⁴

In the mid-twentieth century, phenomenologist and historian of religion Mircea Eliade criticized scholars who attempted to reduce religion to nonreligious phenomena.

²⁰ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches in the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Vol. I, 3rd American Ed. (New York: Holt, 1889 [1871]), 424. This belief is primary, and ritual—“the dramatic utterance of religious thought”—is secondary (Vol. II, 362).

²¹ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol.3, Marx and Engels: 1843–44* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 175.

²² Simone de Beauvoir argued religion was a tool for oppressing women, deceiving them into accepting their second-class status by providing them with a false belief that they are equal with men. See: *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976 [1949]).

²³ In particular, Max Weber examined the effects on religion on economic activities and noticed that heavily Protestant societies were the most highly developed capitalist ones. He argued that the Protestant work ethic influenced the development of capitalism. See: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). Originally published in 1904–1905 under the German title: *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1977 [1966]). Originally published in 1916–1917 under the German title: *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*.

Instead, he posited that it will only be recognized “if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious.”²⁵ He argued for the irreducibility of the sacred, and thus supported a *sui generis* approach to the study of religion.²⁶ In contrast to this approach, historian J.Z. Smith concluded at the end of the twentieth century that the term religion is “created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as ‘language’ plays in linguistics or ‘culture’ plays in anthropology.”²⁷

If religion is a difficult concept to define, it is unsurprising that it is hard to locate with certainty in society. Perhaps in line with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s 1964 infamous decision not to further define “hard core” pornography but to state that “I know it when I see it,” it may not be helpful to pursue a strict—and certainly not universal—definition here.²⁸ However, many people will “know it” when they see

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Meridian Books, 1966), xvii. Emphasis in the original.

²⁶ Scholars who support an understanding of religion as *sui generis* insist that religion “is a matter ‘of its own sorts’; its forms of expression deserve explanation on their own terms.” That is, “Religious life should be understood in accord with what it claims to be, not with a determination to prove it other than what it appears” (Daniel L. Pals, “Is Religion a *Sui Generis* Phenomenon?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55:2 [1987], 259). In other words, any attempt to explain religion using nonreligious terms reduces it to something other than itself. According to Pals, an early version of the case for a *sui generis* approach to religion appeared in Friedrich Max Müller’s 1873 *Introduction to the Science of Religion*.

²⁷ J.Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, trans. M. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 268–284. Brent Nongbri argues that religion as a concept is a *recent* development in European history, one that has been projected backward in time with the result that religion appears to be a universal part of human experience. He writes, “If we want to go on talking about ancient Mesopotamian religion, ancient Greek religion, or any other ancient religion, we should always bear in mind that we are talking about something modern when we do. We are not naming something that any ancient person would recognize.” In other words, religion is a *modern category* and must be acknowledged as such. In *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 153.

²⁸ “*Jacobellis v. Ohio*,” *FindLaw*, n.d. [Online](#).

religion—whether at a historic site or in a set of practices, beliefs, and/or attitudes. That is, even if scholars question religion’s usefulness as a category, there are nevertheless very real, on-the-ground debates over religious practices taking place at heritage sites today. For some stakeholders, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are not, or should not be, religious spaces. They are heritage sites, which are in a separate sphere from religion. For others, the religious status of these sites is so clear that to deny religious use of them is unfathomable. Despite attempts to separate out religion from heritage, these events reveal that the boundary between religion and heritage is inherently blurry.²⁹

Ultimately, religion has played out in unexpected ways at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia in the past quarter century. Their more recent use as religious spaces both challenge the theory of secularization—not by proving it categorically fails, but by demonstrating there exists a back-and-forth tension over secularization that is driven by on-the-ground stakeholders. Just as the boundary between religion and heritage is blurry, so too is the boundary between the religious and secular. Part II identifies the motivations for the more recent religious use of these sites (Chapter 4) and examines what site transformations occurred to generate religious places and to service religious communities (Chapter 5). Taken together, these chapters reveal the physical, visual, and conceptual boundaries stakeholders carve out for religious engagements with the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia today, revealing how heritage sites can be important loci for religious revival.

²⁹ See: Yujie Zhu, Shu-Li Wang, and Michael Rowlands, “Heritage and Religion in East Asia,” in *Heritage and Religion in East Asia*, ed. Shu-Li Wang, Michael Rowlands, and Yujie Zhu (Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2020), 1–12.

Chapter 4: Making Heritage Religious Again

*“The Rotunda either is or isn’t a church.”*¹

*“Monuments should unite, not cause conflicts.”*²

Despite concerns that heritage status, and UNESCO World Heritage listing in particular, hinder the development of a historic place (threatening to “freeze” it in a particular time period), the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia did not stop evolving after they were made into monuments and museums at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the case of Hagia Sophia, it even evolved *away* from its museum status. Over the course of the century, and in the past twenty-five years especially, the secular identity of these two sites has been challenged on numerous occasions. This chapter considers the events and individuals that enabled the sites’ religious transformation. It examines the clashes between religious communities, residents who adamantly advocate the secular use of these sites, and the state, identifying the ways in which heritage discourse intersects these conflicts. Such disputes, I argue, are oftentimes driven by charismatic individuals, who bring their own political and religious ambitions to these discussions. Indeed, charisma plays a significant role in the transformations of these sites, as expressed through both people and objects.³

As the histories of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia have demonstrated, time and again, religion and heritage are entangled with politics and, as such, are especially ripe

¹ Quoted in Charles Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda?: Church vs. State in Greece,” *Anthropology Today* 14:5 (1998): 9.

² Quoted in Κατερίνα Λυμπεροπούλου, “Ξανάρχισε ο πόλεμος για τη Ροτόντα: Μουσείο ή ναός;,” *The TOC*, 7 February 2016. [Online](#).

³ Charisma typically refers to a compelling aura or personality that can inspire commitment in others. Within religious contexts, it is sometimes encountered in terms of a divinely conferred power.

loci for conflict. By identifying what is at the core of this dissonance—such as the powerful effects that religious objects can have on a visitor’s understanding and experience of a site—we can better identify paths forward in the preservation and management of sacred secular or religious heritage today. Ultimately, this chapter also explores the ways in which the concept of secularism has shifted for the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, so as to enable religious practices in heritage places today.

The Rotunda and Thessaloniki

The Rotunda’s use as a religious space in the twentieth century is a complicated picture. Between 1917, when the Rotunda was declared to be a monument, and 1978, when it was closed after suffering damage from a major earthquake, the building appears to have occasionally been used for liturgical services, for which the Bishopric of Thessaloniki (the local Orthodox Church) had to request permission.⁴ The state limited religious access to three times a year: the feast day of the Three Holy Hierarchs (Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom) in January, St. George’s feast in April, and the beginning of the academic year (starting in 1964, the Rotunda functioned as a church for the nearby Aristotle University).⁵ The same year, a Holy Table (Αγία Τράπεζα, or “altar” as it is generally known in the Western tradition) was installed and

⁴ On 20 June 1978, Thessaloniki suffered an earthquake of 6.2 magnitude on the Richter scale. This earthquake was so severe, according to George G. Penelis and Gregory G. Penelis, that it “pushed the Rotunda to the limits of collapse.” In *Structural Restoration of Masonry Monuments: Arches, Domes and Walls* (Boca Raton, Fl.: CRC Press, 2020), 251.

⁵ Charles Stewart, “Immanent or Eminent Domain? The Contest over Thessaloniki’s Rotonda,” in *The Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property*, ed. Robert Layton, Julian Thomas, and Peter G. Stone (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 188; Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda?,” 5.

consecrated in the building, despite its monument status.⁶ After the building was closed following the 1978 earthquake, considerable restoration work took place at the Rotunda in the 1990s. By 1997, the site was set to reopen as a civic space or as a museum. During these developments in the 1990s, the Rotunda was occasionally used for liturgical purposes.

Because of the Rotunda's status as a monument, the state officially had "the exclusive, inalienable, indisputable and perpetual ownership of the building" (την αποκλειστική, αναπαλλοτρεώτη, αδιαμφισβήτητη και διηνεκή κυριότητα του κτίσματος).⁷ However, as this section will show, this ownership has been disputed and negotiated. In what follows, I explore the clash between the Bishopric of Thessaloniki and the Greek state over the Rotunda as it played out between 1994 and 1996, and I discuss ongoing aftershocks of this conflict from 2015 onwards, when the site ceremonially reopened to the public.

Conflict in the 1990s

Charles Stewart's 1998 article "Who Owns the Rotonda?"⁸—the inspiration for my own project—narrates the intense disputes that took place in Thessaloniki in the 1990s, both physically at the site and legally in the Greek courts. Over the Christmas period in late 1994/early 1995, the Bishopric of Thessaloniki (also referred to here as the

⁶ Stewart, "Who Owns the Rotonda?," 4.

⁷ Θάνου Καμήλαλη, "Ροτόντα: Η μάχη για έναν «ναό» πολιτισμού," *The Press Project*, 4 May 2017. [Online](#).

⁸ Rotonda is an alternate spelling of Rotunda.

Church)⁹ received permission to put up an exhibition of icons in the building, as well as to celebrate one Divine Liturgy, which took place on 17 December 1994, at the opening of the exhibition. According to local sources, however, it seems the Church actually held more than one liturgy between the opening and closing of the exhibition on 7 January 1995. It also appears that church-goers expected continued services even after the end of the exhibition period, because, on the morning of Sunday 8 January 1995, a group of thirty or forty individuals headed to the Rotunda, only to find the gates to the premise locked. The items that had been brought into the Rotunda and used for the Divine Liturgy services during the Christmas season—icons, seats, etc.—were still inside the building, perhaps suggesting that Church authorities also believed that such services would continue.¹⁰

Church members voiced their frustration over their exclusion from the building. The Church, in response, called for an all-night vigil to be held two days later, on 10 January 1995. When that evening came, police and employees of the Ninth Ephoria of Byzantine Antiquities¹¹ were stationed inside the gates of the Rotunda, to guard the site. In some ways, police presence reveals how religious activity had become out of place—perhaps even made profane—at this historic site. Crowds gathered at the locked gates, and began shouting slogans such as, “Not a synagogue, nor a mosque, but a Greek

⁹ I deploy Church with an uppercase “c” to refer to the institution (the body of Christians organized under a hierarchy of leaders) and church with a lowercase “c” to refer to the physical place of worship.

¹⁰ According to a later journalist, the exhibition was premeditated, nothing more than a pretext for occupying the monument. In Καμήλαλη, “Ροτόντα.”

¹¹ The Ninth Ephoria of Byzantine Antiquities is the archaeological service that administered the Rotunda between 1917 and 1978.

church” and “This is Greece, not Albania; For Macedonia and Orthodoxy!”¹² Their chants conveyed their view that the Rotunda was an Orthodox church.

An undercurrent of this conflict at the Rotunda appears to have been a fear of the small Muslim minority in the city, or a fear that Muslim interests were being placed before those of Christians. For instance, the Church had been incensed when the European Union, in the years preceding Thessaloniki’s “European City of Culture 1997” designation, funded a proposal that included the restoration of the Rotunda’s minaret as well as the two Ottoman tombs onsite.¹³ This frustration over the attention given to Ottoman Muslim vestiges was exacerbated by the lack of overt Christian symbols on the outside of the Rotunda.¹⁴ In the eyes of some ecclesiastical members, there was nothing

¹² Quoted in Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda?,” 5. The first chant (“Not a synagogue, nor a mosque, but a Greek church”) may be less a response to the historical uses of the Rotunda specifically (for no one ever claimed it was a synagogue), but rather is in reaction to the city’s complex religious history, in which mosques, churches, and synagogues once peppered Thessaloniki’s landscape. The chant rejects that the Rotunda can be anything but a church.

In the second chant (“This is Greece, not Albania; For Macedonia and Orthodoxy!”), protestors make strong claims of the Greek Orthodox identity of the country as well as the Macedonian region, in which Thessaloniki is located. These protests were happening in the 1990s, only a few years after the Revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe—following the fall of communist regimes in the region—which resulted in a mass emigration of Albanians and other eastern Europeans to Greece. Greece’s northwestern neighbor, Albania, is one of the few European countries with a majority Muslim population, and thus this chant reveals both anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments.

¹³ The “European Capital of Culture” (known as the “European City of Culture” until 1999) is a European Commission initiative developed in 1985 by Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri, designed to highlight the diversity and richness of cultures across the European Union. Cities interested in participating in the competition submit a proposal several years in advance of the title year, and winners are designated four years before the actual title year. According to the European Commission’s website, the event has proved to be a great opportunity for “Regenerating cities; Raising the international profile of cities; Enhancing the image of cities in the eyes of their own inhabitants; Breathing new life into a city’s culture; Boosting tourism.” In “European Capitals of Culture,” *European Commission*, n.d. [Online](#).

¹⁴ Tourism and economic considerations factor into heritage preservation and management decisions. The preservation of Thessaloniki’s Ottoman remains became a larger priority around the 1980s when it became apparent that it would render the city “more attractive not only as a host of major cultural events but also for tourists.” In Styliana Galiniki, “The Gentrification of Memory: The Past as a Social Event in Thessaloniki of the Early Twenty-First Century,” in *Contested Antiquity: Archaeological Heritage and Social Conflict in Modern Greece and Cyprus*, ed. Esther Solomon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 171.

externally marking the Rotunda's former Christian identity, such as a bell tower or cross. Other events during this time further suggest an anxiety over a Muslim presence in the city. The Church voiced a concern that students were falling prey to heresies, noting that Muslims were praying at Aristotle University's Theological School on Fridays. One rumor baselessly claimed that the Ministry of Culture was planning to convert the Rotunda into a center for Islamic Studies.¹⁵

A couple hours after the protestors first arrived at the Rotunda for the all-night vigil of 10 January, the crowd was able to break through the gates of the site (perhaps due to previously tampered locks), and the event now took place inside the Rotunda. Hundreds of people attended, though the vigil did not last the entire night as had been planned. In the weeks that followed, the issue of the Orthodox Church's access to the Rotunda was brought to the courts: The Bishopric filed a lawsuit against the Ninth Ephoria for violating their right to worship. The Rotunda was caught in a conflict between the Bishopric of Thessaloniki and the Ninth Ephoria, between religious authorities and archaeologists, and ultimately between Church and state.

Ioannis Tassias, a senior archimandrite,¹⁶ was a charismatic figure who positioned himself at the center of these debates. He framed the conflict at the Rotunda as one of freedom of religious expression. He thought the ancient building should function as a religious space, and its museum role should be limited to the display of religious objects or the organization of religious events. Tassias argued that the only reason the Rotunda still stood today (unlike its contemporaries, such as Thessaloniki's ancient hippodrome)

¹⁵ Stewart, "Who Owns the Rotonda," 5–6.

¹⁶ An archimandrite is the head of a monastery or group of monasteries within the Orthodox tradition.

was because it had been repurposed as a church. This sentiment was shared by other locals. In their view, the building's survival was owed to its religious use, and specifically its conversion into a *church*, not its later adaptation and continued preservation as a mosque starting in the sixteenth century.

Furthermore, Tassias and the lawsuit brought against the Ninth Ephoria charged archaeologists of plundering the Rotunda: The Holy Table installed in 1964 was missing, as were some crosses and a relic. Tassias proclaimed to the media: "The Turks took the cross down from the [c]hurch, and so did the archaeologists. The Turks were the first to destroy the Holy Table, and then the archaeologists. What is going on?"¹⁷ Tassias voiced a great distrust of archaeologists (perhaps as symbols of the state and secularization), comparing their actions to that of the Ottomans who had converted the Rotunda into a mosque. By leveling this accusation, he questioned where exactly the archaeologists' allegiance lay and what their work was attempting to do.

On 17 January 1995, the Ministry of Culture reiterated its decision to limit religious services at the Rotunda to three times a year. The very next day, the Church rejected this decision, scheduling another liturgy for the following Sunday. Though the Bishopric of Thessaloniki, and perhaps Tassias more specifically, were quite vocal in this conflict, not all religious institutions rejected the Ministry of Culture's decision. The dean of Aristotle University's Theological School, for instance, supported the dual use of the Rotunda as a religious and secular space, and also pointed out that "some restraint on the part of the Church was necessary for international political reasons."¹⁸ More specifically,

¹⁷ Quoted in Stewart, "Who Owns the Rotonda?," 5.

¹⁸ Stewart, "Who Owns the Rotonda?," 6.

the dean tempered his words of caution by appealing to both sides in the debate, expressing a desire that Hagia Sophia in Istanbul would one day again be the site of Divine Liturgy.

Liturgies took place on and off at the Rotunda over the course of 1995, in line with the Minister of Culture’s decision, who had verbally consented to this use. During an all-night vigil that occurred between 9–10 September, the Church took it upon themselves to install a Holy Table inside the building, which was permanently cemented in place. It still stands in the building today (Figure 22). Stewart writes: “This action almost certainly exceeded the Church’s limited rights to ‘use’ the Rotonda, and it also violated state law about making unauthorized additions to a conservation monument.”¹⁹

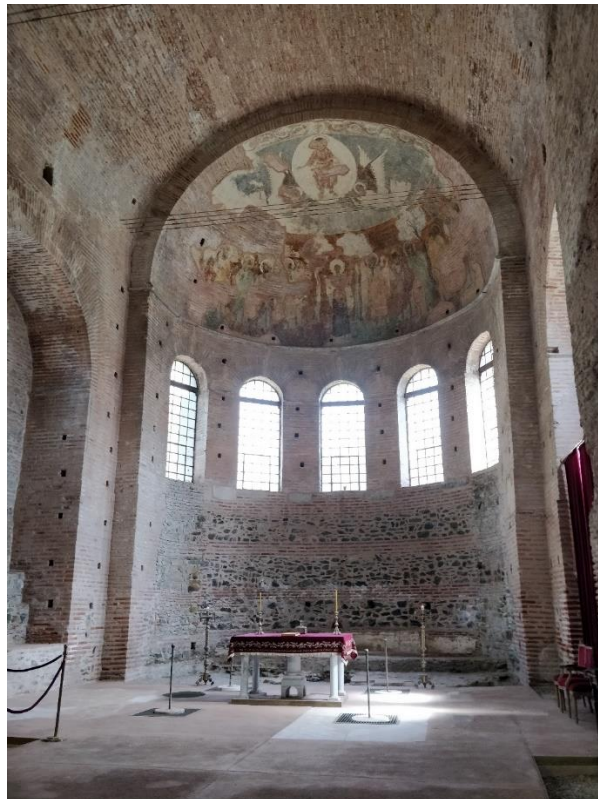


Figure 22: The Holy Table installed without authorization in 1995 remains in the Rotunda today (2021).

¹⁹ Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda?,” 6.

As a consecrated object, a Holy Table would have been viewed as re-sanctifying the Rotunda, and thus, the Bishopric of Thessaloniki may have hoped to seize the site from the Ninth Ephoria. According to the Church, removing the Holy Table would have been a violation of its holy canons. In the view of Tassias and other church members, once a site had been used and sanctified as a church, the state should not regulate how the Orthodox Church uses the building.²⁰ That is, the state had no say in how the Rotunda was to be used nor how often. Compromises did not make sense. As one local resident remarked: “The Rotunda either is or isn’t a church.”²¹ There was no middle ground.

Members of the Ninth Ephoria did not feel comfortable removing the Holy Table themselves. The organization, which had already been suspected of plundering the Rotunda of its Christian objects (including the Holy Table from 1964), was concerned about further accusations and so decided to file a complaint instead, leaving the decision to due process. The religious identity of the members of the Ninth Ephoria—who were themselves also Orthodox Christians—may have played a role in their hesitation to intervene directly in the matter.²²

On 30 October 1995, this conflict came to a violent peak. Known as the “piano incident,” this has been regarded by some commentators as Thessaloniki’s “most emblematic, embarrassing moment” (η πιο εμβληματική, ντροπιαστική στιγμή).²³ On this

²⁰ Αντώνης Μανιτάκης, “Η Ροτόντα, σύμβολο πολιτισμικής ταυτότητας της Θεσσαλονίκης,” *Η Ροτόντα στον Κύκλο με την Κιμωλία* (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 1997), 75.

²¹ Quoted in Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda?,” 9.

²² Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda?,” 6.

²³ Άρης Δημοκίδης, “Όταν ένας εξαγριωμένος μοναχός μαχαίρωσε αυτό το πιάνο στην Θεσσαλονίκη,” *LiFO*, 20 January 2016. [Online](#). Note: Greek text has been copied verbatim from the source text.

October evening, when the Church was still waiting for an official response from the Council, a jazz festival approved by the Ministry of Culture had been planned at the Rotunda (Figure 23). It was advertised as a multicultural evening event, a kind of preview for the long-awaited cultural event in which Thessaloniki would serve as the European City of Culture 1997. Meanwhile, however, the Church's television station had called on the faithful to set up a vigil outside the Rotunda, the aim of which was to prevent the concert from happening. When the evening came, protestors affiliated with the Church accosted attendees, shouting insults such as "Anti-Christ" (Αντίχριστε), "Anti-Greek" (Ανθέλληνα), "Satanist" (Σατανιστή), and "prostitutes" (Πόρνοι), and accusing them of wanting to make the Rotunda into a brothel or a mosque.²⁴

At one point, the crowd rushed into the Rotunda. In this chaos, a guard was knocked down and the piano—"instrument of the Devil" (οργάνου του Διαβόλου)²⁵—was attacked multiple times with knives. Accounts report that a monk called singer Georgia Syllaiou a Satanist and threw a chair at her, while someone else threatened pianist Sakis Papadimitriou with a knife, and another monk knocked down a guard (Figure 24).²⁶ In the midst of this violent chaos, protestors lit candles and chanted. Tassias eventually took the microphone and proclaimed victory to the protestors: "The people of God have triumphed. They tell us that Thessaloniki is a multi-historical city. If

²⁴ Τέλλος Φίλης, "Μια εκκρεμότητα 20 ετών ενός μαχαίρωμένου πιάνου," *LiFo*, 20 January 2016. [Online](#).

²⁵ Δημοκίδης, "Όταν ένας εξαγριωμένος μοναχός."

²⁶ See, for instance: Δημοκίδης, "Όταν ένας εξαγριωμένος μοναχός."



Figure 23: Poster advertising the 30 October 1995 jazz culture planned at the Rotunda.
Source: Parallaxi.gr.



Figure 24: Monk attacks the piano at the jazz event inside the Rotunda.
Source: Parallaxi.gr.

they mean that many conquerors passed through here, then I agree. But the Orthodox character of the city never altered.”²⁷ For Tassias and his supporters, the “true” identity of the Rotunda, much like Thessaloniki or Greece more broadly, was always Christian and continued to be so. They rejected their palimpsestic histories. The conflict had reached its peak and would play out later in the courts of Greece.

In 1999, a few years after the piano incident, the Minister of Culture Evangelos Venizelos reaffirmed that the Rotunda belonged to Greece’s Ministry of Culture, a conclusion ratified by the Plenary Session of the Council of State. The decision clarified the Rotunda’s function as a museum and annulled the Rules of Procedure of the Holy Synod (which had declared the Rotunda a site of pilgrimage), deeming it illegal and unconstitutional.²⁸ The decision further stated that the Rotunda could be used up to twelve times a year as a *naós* (ναός)—but not as an *ekklēsia* (εκκλησία). In a context outside the Orthodox Church, both these functions can be translated with the plain English word “church.” In the Orthodox tradition, however, *naós* is used to refer to the church building (another translation for the term is “temple”), whereas *ekklēsia* refers to “Church” with a capital “C.” The latter does not refer to a specific place or building, but rather to a gathering of people called out for divine purpose. In other words, the Rotunda as *naós* signifies that people can use the building to worship, but the building itself is not home to this community of believers.

According to the Plenary Session, the term *naós* meant that the Rotunda was a “monument of interfaith character” (μνημείο διαθρησκευτικού χαρακτήρα). Indeed, since

²⁷ Quoted in Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda,” 7.

²⁸ Καμήλαλη, “Ροτόντα.”

this decision, the Rotunda is often described as having a “dual character” (διπλό χαρακτήρα): it is both a museum (μουσείο) and a place of worship (λατρεία).²⁹ It seems that Thessalonians eventually came to embrace—or at least tolerate—this dual identity. Panteleimon II, Metropolitan of Thessaloniki at the time, accepted the decision. Afterward, Yiannis Boutaris, the Mayor of Thessaloniki (2011–2019), and Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Anthimos Rousas (2004–) both indicated that this decision facilitated a peaceful resolution to the conflicts over the Rotunda that had transpired in the 1990s.

2015 Onwards

However, murmurs of this controversy persisted. Starting in 2015, issues pertaining to the Rotunda’s identity and use again made headlines. Between 16 November and 18 December 2015, the Rotunda temporarily closed for a conservation push that would finally allow the building to be seen without the scaffolding that had obscured it since the earthquake of 1978. Although the Rotunda had been open to the public since at least the 1990s, the building was in a fragile state, and the mosaics on the interior of the Rotunda’s dome that have come to define the site were not easily visible. After a month of conservation work, on 18 December 2015, the Rotunda reopened to the public.

This occasion was inaugurated with a musical event. Such events were common, and, as the piano incident demonstrates, typically intended to celebrate the cultural rather than religious heritage of the Rotunda and of Thessaloniki. However, at this December 2015 inauguration event, newspapers and other local sources characterized it as being of

²⁹ Καμήλαλη, “Ροτόντα.”

“Christian color” (χριστιανικό χρώμα),³⁰ “highly religious in nature” (έντονα θρησκευτικό χαρακτήρα),³¹ and “flooded with Christmas lights and hymns” (πλημμυρίζει από φως και ύμνους των Χριστουγέννων).³² Both Mayor Boutaris and Metropolitan Anthimos were in attendance. As the very first event after the Rotunda’s reopening, this musical performance was a way of establishing to the public what kind of space the Rotunda was intended to be. Given this symbolic importance, some residents interpreted its Christian flair as inappropriate.³³ The tension between the religious and secular uses of the Rotunda proved to be an ongoing issue.

The reopening of the Rotunda also marked the moment when the building was “delivered” or “handed to the public” (παραδίδεται στο κοινό), an act undertaken by Stamatis Chondrogiannis, the site’s curator and the head of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Thessaloniki.³⁴ Here the verb *paradídō* (παραδίδω) suggests that the Rotunda was entrusted to the public. The musical event therefore both established the Rotunda’s public status, and, through its Christian overtones, simultaneously recognized the Christian value of the site.

³⁰ Κύα Τζήμου, “Η Ροτόντα “απελευθερώνεται” μετά από 40 χρόνια,” *Parallaxi*, 16 December 2015. [Online](#).

³¹ Κατερίνα Λυμπεροπούλου, “Κοσμοσυρροή στη Ροτόντα, άνοιξε μετά από 40 χρόνια,” *The TOC*, 19 December 2015. [Online](#).

³² Γιώτα Μυρτσιώτη, “Η Ροτόντα αποκαλύπτεται λουσμένη στο φως,” *Η Καθημερινή*, 17 December 2015. [Online](#).

³³ One journalist describes some citizens and archaeologists as being on pins and needles (κάθεται σε αναμμένα κάρβουνα) at the inauguration event. In Απόστολου Λυκεσά, “Εξηγήσεις και αντιδράσεις για τον σταυρό,” *EfSyn*, 21 December 2015. [Online](#).

³⁴ Κατερίνα Λυμπεροπούλου, “Μαυσωλείο Γαλέριου ως τέμενος: Η ιστορία της Ροτόντας. Παραδίδεται στο κοινό,” *The TOC*, 16 December 2015. [Online](#).

About a month later, on 26 January 2016, the Central Archaeological Council³⁵ (Κεντρικό Αρχαιολογικό Συμβούλιο, or KAS)³⁶ reaffirmed the decision made by Minister of Culture Venezilos in 1999: The Rotunda’s primary function is as a monument, but it could be used for Greek Orthodox liturgical services twelve times a year. The decision was signed by Aristides Baltas, Minister of Culture and Sports³⁷ (2015–2016), and remains in effect at the present time of writing. According to newspaper reports, when the Rotunda functions as a church, “ecclesiastical rules will be followed” (θα τηρούνται οι εκκλησιαστικοί κανόνες);³⁸ otherwise, “the multicultural character (ο πολυπολιτισμικός χαρακτήρας) of the monument will be preserved.”³⁹ Mayor Boutaris confirmed this use of the Rotunda, noting that objects used for liturgies are “mobile” (κινητός) and only placed in the Rotunda during religious events.⁴⁰ In an interview, he reiterated that the Rotunda would not be “ecclesiastical.” Liturgical services could occasionally be permitted to take place there but, categorically speaking, the Rotunda is not a religious site.

³⁵ Set up shortly after the establishment of the modern Greek state, the Council was responsible for the protection, management, and integration of antiquities and cultural heritage in Greek society. Issues are submitted to the Council by Directorates of the Ministry of Culture and Sport.

³⁶ Now Κεντρικό Αρχαιολογικό Συμβούλιο & Συμβούλιο Μουσείων, or Central Archaeological Council & Museum Council.

³⁷ The Ministry has changed names multiple times since its inception. From 1971 to 1985, it was known as the Ministry of Culture and Science; between 1985–2009, as the Ministry of Culture; 2009–2012, as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism; 2012–2013, as the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports; and 2013 onwards, as the Ministry of Culture and Sports. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to this ministry as the Ministry of Culture.

³⁸ Λυμπεροπούλου, “Ξανάρχισε ο πόλεμος για τη Ροτόντα.”

³⁹ Λυμπεροπούλου, “Κοσμοσυρροή στη Ροτόντα.”

⁴⁰ My experience says otherwise. During my multiple visits to the Rotunda, a modern icon of Christ sat in the altar (or sanctuary, as it is known in the Western tradition) even during non-liturgical days.

Boutaris' statement thus clarified that the Rotunda is permitted a religious *function*, but not a religious *character*.⁴¹ It is a secular site wherein its secularity is temporarily suspended twelve times a year; during these occasions, ecclesial authorities have temporary control, though they are not the permanent stewards of the site. Through this somewhat middle-ground decision, Boutaris hoped to avoid another large debate of the identity and use of the site, stating: “Monuments should unite, not cause conflicts” (Τα μνημεία πρέπει να ενώνουν, όχι να προκαλούν έριδες).⁴² In a similar vein, curator Stamatis Chondrogiannis stated that, “We want the Rotunda to be a monument of reconciliation (ένα μνημείο συμφιλίωσης) and not of conflict (όχι συγκρούσεων).”⁴³ Both Boutaris and Chondrogiannis acknowledged that heritage can lead to conflict—indeed, it already had in Thessaloniki—but they wished to circumvent future issues through maintaining clear boundaries regarding *ownership* and *use*. Through such boundaries, their logic suggests, the Rotunda also has the potential of being a monument for unity. It is not just a matter of avoiding conflict but of actively fostering reconciliation through this monument to the past, an idea to which I will return in Part III.

To balance the twelve ecclesiastical events permitted at the Rotunda per year, KAS also approved an annual program of “secular events” (κοσμικών εκδηλώσεων) to

⁴¹ Boutaris also permitted the religious function, but not character, of a Muslim space in the city, at the Yeni Cami (New Mosque), where visitors were permitted to pray during Ramadan. Galiniki writes: “its occasional concession to Muslims was not only a symbolic gesture aiming to attract more Turkish visitors; it could also be considered the expression of a different attitude in handling the cultural capital of the city’s past” (“The Gentrification of Memory,” 176).

⁴² Λυμπεροπούλου, “Ξανάρχισε ο πόλεμος για τη Ροτόντα.”

⁴³ Βάσω Λυκουρίνου, “Κυρίες και κύριοι, η Ροτόντα αποκαλύφθηκε και είναι εντυπωσιακή!,” *Thestival*, 17 December 2015. [Online](#).

take place at the site.⁴⁴ Types of events proposed included lectures, workshops, and exhibitions of “high aesthetics related to the space” (εκθέσεις υψηλής αισθητικής συναφούς θεματολογίας με τον χώρο), but with “simple museographic presentation” (λιτή μουσειογραφική παρουσίαση).⁴⁵ According to Mayor Boutaris, the twelve secular events would parallel the twelve liturgies, thus ensuring “the secular character (κοσμικό χαρακτήρα) of the monument.”⁴⁶

When the Rotunda was reconsecrated as a church in 1912, a cross had been placed on its roof. However, it was removed in 1955 in order to make it a “Roman monument.”⁴⁷ With the 2015 reopening, curator Chondrogiannis announced that a cross would be returned to the site. However, the body with authority for making this decision was KAS. The rationale for adding a cross to the top of the building was based on the matter of “balance.” That is, the still-standing minaret supplied a very visual symbol of the Rotunda’s past use as a mosque, but there was no equivalent symbol for its Christian use visible on the exterior of the building. Adding a cross would therefore help “to balance the image of the monument historically” (να ισοροπήσει την εικόνα του μνημείου ιστορικά).⁴⁸ Simultaneously, according to Mayor Boutaris, a cross would serve as a prompt to “remind us of this very story of the monument” (για να θυμίζει ακριβώς αυτήν την ιστορία του μνημείου), that is, the Christian story of the Rotunda’s long

⁴⁴ Λυμπεροπούλου, “Ξανάρχισε ο πόλεμος για τη Ροτόντα.”

⁴⁵ In other words, the Rotunda would not be used as an art gallery. See: “«Πράσινο φως» για πολιτιστικές εκδηλώσεις στη Ροτόντα,” *NewsBeast*, 27 January 2016. [Online](#).

⁴⁶ Λυμπεροπούλου, “Ξανάρχισε ο πόλεμος για τη Ροτόντα.”

⁴⁷ Τζήμου, “Η Ροτόντα.”

⁴⁸ Γιώτα Μυρτσιώτη, “Σκιές στη λάμψη της Ροτόντας,” *Η Καθημερινή*, 31 January 2016. [Online](#).

history of repurposing.⁴⁹ At the time, the mayor did not think that adding a cross would change the character of the monument. The addition of a cross would emphasize the Rotunda's "timeless and intercultural sanctity" (διαχρονική και διαπολιτισμική ιερότητα).⁵⁰ The adjective *diapolitismikí* (διαπολιτισμική), translated as "intercultural," is suggestive. Whereas the term multicultural refers to a multiplicity of cultures, it does not suggest anything about tolerance or exchange. The term intercultural, on the other hand, implies understanding, respect, and mutual exchange between cultures.⁵¹

Chondrogiannis' announcement was not welcomed by all Thessalonians. A very vocal minority circulated a petition against this change, acquiring 653 signatures from Greeks and foreigners, "people of letters, spirit, art, and sciences" (ανθρώπους των γραμμάτων, του πνεύματος, των τεχνών και των επιστημών), some of whom were teachers and government employees.⁵² However, Mayor Boutaris deemed these complaints to be "individual and hysterical" (μεμονωμένες και υστερικές).⁵³ In 2016, KAS approved the placement of the cross, but it was decided that no action could be taken until a lightning protection assessment had been made. For some, this delay was

⁴⁹ Λυμπεροπούλου, "Ξανάρχισε ο πόλεμος για τη Ροτόντα."

⁵⁰ Μυρτσιώτη, "Η Ροτόντα αποκαλύπτεται λουσμένη στο φως."

⁵¹ The distinction between multicultural and intercultural seems especially important for community-focused or faith-based organizations. The United Church of Canada, for instance, defines multicultural communities as ones in which members live alongside one another and which "usually requires only superficial and polite social interaction." Intercultural communities, on the other hand, are defined by "comprehensive mutuality, reciprocity, and equality" ("Defining Multicultural, Cross-cultural, and Intercultural," *The United Church of Canada*, 2011. [Online](#)). The Spring Institute, a center for intercultural learning, describes an intercultural society as one in which "no one is left unchanged because everyone learns from one another and grows together" (Paula Schriefer, "What's the Difference between Multicultural, Intercultural, and Cross-Cultural Communication?," *Spring Institute*, 18 April 2016. [Online](#)).

⁵² Καμήλαλη, "Ροτόντα."

⁵³ Μυρτσιώτη, "Σκιές στη λάμψη της Ροτόντας."

intentional, an opportunity to mitigate reactions to this addition.⁵⁴ Minister of Culture Baltas himself reacted negatively to the news, stating that he had never signed a decision to allow a cross to be put on top of the Rotunda. We therefore see how this cross, an object that was not intended to change the character of the monument according to Mayor Boutaris, became a much larger issue, involving national politicians like Baltas, and pitting different Thessalonian groups against one another. Tension arose not only between Church and state, as it had in the 1990s, but now it also became a matter of local versus national politics.

Central to the issue was the question of whether additions to heritage sites were appropriate for monuments, or whether they inherently changed the character of the building. The removal of the cross in 1955—which presumably should not have occurred if the Rotunda’s monument status prohibited any significant changes to the site—is revealing. This symbolic gesture reaffirmed the site’s Roman status and thus did change the character of the building. Would the re-addition of a cross do the same? Almost certainly. It is therefore unsurprising that this seemingly small addition to the building became the focal point of a much larger conflict. At the time of writing, in 2022, no cross stands atop the Rotunda. In April 2017, however, some souvenirs circulated which depicted the building with a cross, thus suggesting there had been a certain confidence that one would be added (Figure 25).⁵⁵ The matter appears to have been dropped after a

⁵⁴ Λυμπεροπούλου, “Κοσμοσυρροή στη Ροτόντα.”

⁵⁵ Κία Τζήμου, “Ο Σταυρός της Ροτόντας, το τουριστικό σουβενίρ και το ψέμα του Άνθιμου!,” *Parallaxi*, 29 April 2017. [Online](#).

change in leadership of the Ephorate, seeing that no recent newspaper articles make mention of it.

Though the Orthodox Church may not be the official stewards of the Rotunda, a number of incidents in the past few years demonstrate that the relationship between the Bishopric of Thessaloniki and the heritage site continues to be under negotiation. The following event is illustrative. In 2017, for a Divine Liturgy celebrated on the feast day of St. George (23 April), the Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Thessaloniki and the Ministry of Culture gave permission to the Metropolitan of Thessaloniki, Anthimos, to transfer temporarily the “old inauguration” (παλιά εγκαίνια) to the Rotunda, provided it was immediately returned after the liturgy. According to Anthimos, this blood-stained clothe had been found in the former Holy Table by archaeologists Ejnar Dyggve and Hjalmar Torp in 1953, in an opening covered with marble.⁵⁶ However, days before the 2017 Divine Liturgy, posters circulated in Thessaloniki claiming the permanent placement of the inauguration (Figure 26).⁵⁷ The day after the liturgy, local and state actors reacted loudly and negatively to this installation. The events of the 1990s appeared to be repeating themselves.

⁵⁶ The history of the “old inauguration” is convoluted. The Metropolitan of Thessaloniki announced that Torp took the object to the University of Copenhagen Institute of Forensic Medicine for analysis, where diagnostic results apparently found a blood sample. The inauguration was later returned to then-Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Panteleimon I, who placed the object in the Rotunda in 1964. After the 1978 earthquake that damaged the Rotunda, the inauguration was transferred to the neighboring St. George church. According to Anthimos, in 1980, Torp expressed his desire to restore the ancient inauguration in the Rotunda. It was given to Metropolitan Panteleimon II. In 2017, the inauguration was still located in St. George’s church. In “Καταγγέλουν αυθαιρεσία του μητροπολίτη Άνθιμου στη Ροτόντα,” *News.gr*, 24 April 2017. [Online](#).

⁵⁷ “Η Ροτόντα σε νέες περιπέτειες,” *Parallaxi*, 22 April 2017. [Online](#). Posters distributed by the Metropolitan of Thessaloniki stated: “Anthimos will transfer the old inauguration of the holy Temple [or church] and will place it permanently on the Holy Table” (Άνθιμος θα μεταφέρει το παλαιόν εγκαίνιον του ιερού Ναού και θα το τοποθετήσει μονίμως επί της Αγίας Τραπέζης).



Figure 25: Souvenirs depicting the Rotunda with a cross circled in Thessaloniki.
Source: Parallaxi.gr.



Figure 26: Posters advertised that Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Anthimos would permanently transfer the old inauguration to the Rotunda. Source: Parallaxi.gr.

Much like the Holy Table installed by the Bishopric of Thessaloniki in December 1994 had the power to re-sanctify the Rotunda, the inauguration, as a consecrated object, would have a similar effect. By intending the permanent installation of this religious object, the Church—this time represented by Anthimos rather than Tassias—was again challenging state authority over the Rotunda. Anthimos’ actions risked a situation that, according to the Church’s holy canons, cannot be overturned; the Rotunda would have, *de facto*, been made into a church.⁵⁸ This event reveals the powerful effect of religious objects—not just as a medium for accessing the divine, but as a means of establishing ecclesiastical authority and defining religious space. However, the inauguration was soon removed from the Rotunda, after much public outcry.

The organization “Friends of Rotunda,” for instance, released a statement which read: “The Ministry of Culture and its competent services must defend the identity of the monument as a cultural asset and ensure its exceptionally worshipful use will not erase its cultural and museum identity.”⁵⁹ This installation was thus portrayed as incompatible with the Rotunda’s status as a museum. The Coalition of the Radical Left-Progressive Alliance, known as SYRIZA—a political party in Greece founded in 2004—characterized Anthimos’ action as a “violation of legality” (*παραβίαση της νομιμότητας*) and “coup d’état” (*πραξικοπηματική*). They stated that it was “an arbitrary and aggressive action of the ecclesiastical establishment of the city against civilization and the Republic

⁵⁸ According to one critic, the installation enabled the Rotunda to acquire “the image of the temple in operation” (*την εικόνα του ναού εν λειτουργία*), in turn justifying “its occupation and continuous worship use” (*την κατάληψή του και τη συνεχή λατρευτική χρήση του*). In Θάνου Καμήλαλη, “Ροτόντα.”

⁵⁹ “Η Ροτόντα σε νέες περιπέτειες.” The Greek statement reads: Το Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού και οι αρμόδιες υπηρεσίες του οφείλουν να προασπίσουν την ταυτότητα του μνημείου ως πολιτιστικού αγαθού και να διασφαλίσουν ότι η κατ’εξάιρεση λατρευτική του χρήση, δεν θα εξοβελίσει την πολιτιστική και μουσειακή ταυτότητά του. Quoted in “Η Ροτόντα σε νέες περιπέτειες.”

[of Greece]” (η αυθαίρετη και επιθετική αυτή ενέργεια του εκκλησιαστικού κατεστημένου της πόλης εναντίον του πολιτισμού και της Δημοκρατίας).⁶⁰ Tellingly, SYRIZA alluded to the Rotunda’s status as a UNESCO World Heritage site when it accused the Orthodox Church of wanting to turn it into a place of worship, as if to suggest that a World Heritage site cannot also be a place of religious activity.⁶¹ The organization demanded the Ministry of Culture’s immediate involvement in the affair and for “the strict application of the [Greek] archaeological law” (την αυστηρή εφαρμογή του αρχαιολογικού νόμου)—that is, that no permanent additions can be made to a Greek monument.⁶²

The mayor of Thessaloniki, Boutaris, viewed the act as a “blatant violation” (κατάφωρη παραβίαση) of the 2016 decision made by the Central Archaeological Council, and described the episode as Metropolitan Anthimos’s intentional “occupation (κατάληψη) of the Rotunda.”⁶³ He requested a “complete review” (πλήρη αναθεώρηση) of this decision, and demanded that religious symbols be removed from the Rotunda and that the Church be barred from using the building (να μη γίνεται καμία χρήση).⁶⁴ In other words, Boutaris—who had initially supported the Council’s decision as well as the addition of a cross to the roof of the building—reversed his position. He reminded his

⁶⁰ Βασίλης Καραμπάσης, “ΣΥΡΙΖΑ Θεσσαλονίκης εναντίον μητροπολίτη Άνθιμου για την Ροτόντα,” *EPT News*, 24 April 2017. [Online](#).

⁶¹ This is a bizarre assertion given that other functioning churches in Thessaloniki are part of the city’s World Heritage inscription.

⁶² Καραμπάσης, “ΣΥΡΙΖΑ.”

⁶³ “Ο Μπουτάρης κατηγορεί την Μητρόπολη για «κατάληψη της ροτόντας»,” *Η Καθημερινή*, 24 April 2017. [Online](#).

⁶⁴ “Όσα έγιναν απόψε σε σχέση με τη Ροτόντα,” *Parallaxi*, 24 April 2017. [Online](#).

audience that “the monument should be accessible to the public” (Να είναι επισκέψιμο για το κοινό).⁶⁵ Boutaris, who vowed to change Thessaloniki’s identity as part of his election campaign,⁶⁶ seemed particularly concerned with emphasizing the city’s culturally rich past, perhaps even at the expense of its Christian history, in part to attract Jewish and Turkish visitors to Thessaloniki.⁶⁷ According to *HuffPost Greece*, as the Rotunda stood the day after the Divine Liturgy, it gave “the impression that it is a church” (την εντύπωση ότι είναι εκκλησία).⁶⁸ The mayor’s waffling demonstrates the way in which the debate over the status of the Rotunda has become increasingly nuanced since the 1990s. The conflict is not just driven by Church-state relations (or, in some cases, antagonisms), nor even by questions pitting local versus national politics, but instead by individuals with different opinions about the proper boundaries for religious practices at monuments today. The line between secular and religious uses of the Rotunda has become blurrier—and hopefully, in the future, less violent as well.

⁶⁵ “Για «ετσιθελική κατάληψη» της Ροτόντας κατηγορεί τη Μητρόπολη Θεσσαλονίκης ο Μπουτάρης,” *HuffPost Greece*, 24 April 2017. [Online](#).

⁶⁶ Thessaloniki was steeped in nationalist and conservative sentiments at the time of Boutaris’ campaign. He understood the notions of multiculturalism and interculturalism as holding much promise for Thessaloniki’s prosperity. Styliana Galiniki explains: “This was not the first time that multiculturalism entered the vocabulary of local elected officials. However, never before had it become a systematic policy focused on an attempt to reapproach the local cultural heritage and redefine its content” (“The Gentrification of Memory,” 166). Vestiges that were once used to promote the city’s Greek past were now reinterpreted in light of its more complex multicultural history.

⁶⁷ Boutaris boosted Thessaloniki’s tourism industry by making the city’s multicultural past a “selling point” for a more diverse set of tourists and calling Turks “our brothers.” The mayor has been celebrated for his many achievements, portrayed as a “beacon of hope for Greece,” a politician willing to call out the more shameful parts of Thessaloniki’s history. For instance, he named the destruction of the Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki, along with the deportation of Jews during Nazi occupation, “the darkest moments in its history.” In Anna Leach, “Why the Tattooed Mayor of Thessaloniki is a Beacon of Hope for Greece,” *The Guardian*, 30 December 2004. [Online](#).

⁶⁸ “Για «ετσιθελική κατάληψη» της Ροτόντας.”

Hagia Sophia and Istanbul

Debates over the status of Hagia Sophia not only address whether it is a secular or religious space, but, for those who support its religious use, they also dispute *what kind* of religious space it ought to be. Both Muslim and Christian communities have demanded to see Hagia Sophia officially recognized and used as a mosque and church, respectively. Because Hagia Sophia now functions as a mosque, this section will focus on the events and debates that led up to this conversion.⁶⁹

These calls for conversion gained a lot of traction in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, especially under the tenure of politician Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However, such petitions are not new to this period. Ever since Hagia Sophia's transformation into a museum in the 1930s, there has been resistance to this secularizing change, though these voices have not always been acknowledged, or been given the space to be heard. For instance, demands that Hagia Sophia again become a mosque were made soon after the Kemalist regime held Turkey's first free elections in 1950. For some Turks, Hagia Sophia's conversion into a museum had been a symbol of humiliation, a sign that the nation had sold its soul to the West.⁷⁰ A few decades later, on the 543rd anniversary of the Ottomans' conquest of Constantinople (29 May 1996), hundreds of Turks held a demonstration in Istanbul, once again requesting that Hagia Sophia be returned to a

⁶⁹ At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the voices and the long history of those who wished to see Hagia Sophia as a Christian space. These stakeholders are very vocal and were staunchly against Hagia Sophia's transformation into a mosque, in part claiming that the site was originally a church and therefore its rightful function is that of a church. However, due to space constraints, I limit my analysis to the demands pertaining to its use as a mosque.

⁷⁰ Selim Kuru, "Turkey's Islamist Dream Finally Becomes a Reality," *The New York Times*, 14 July 2020. [Online](#).

mosque.⁷¹ Hagia Sophia has therefore long been a site of contestation. The twenty-first century presents a shift in this dynamic, because the building's status as a museum was eventually deemed illegal in 2020.

Erdoğan

Turkey's twelfth president Erdoğan (2014–) played a central role in changing Hagia Sophia's status from museum to mosque. Along with Tassias and Anthimos (discussed in the Rotunda section), he demonstrates the importance of charismatic figures in these types of controversies. Turkey has seen the rise of a cult of personality around Erdoğan—increasingly known as “The Chief”⁷²—who is lauded for his “rock-star charisma,”⁷³ “charismatic, combative talks,”⁷⁴ and “fiery oratorical skills.”⁷⁵ Prior to becoming president in 2014, he served as Istanbul's mayor from 1994 to 1998, representing the Islamist Welfare Party. He would be removed from this position, banned from political office and made to serve four months of a ten-month prison sentence on the charge of reciting religious hatred and inciting violence.⁷⁶ The party itself was declared

⁷¹ Stewart, “Who Owns the Rotonda?,” 7, ft. 5.

⁷² Mustafa Aykol, “Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism: Lessons from Turkey's Struggle to Balance Democracy and Laiklik,” *The Century Foundation*, 25 April 2019. [Online](#).

⁷³ Stuart Williams and Dilay Gundogan, “With Rock-Star Charisma, Erdogan Enchants Turks,” *Middle East Eye*, 12 February 2015. [Online](#).

⁷⁴ Carlotta Gall, “Sermons and Shouted Insults: How Erdogan Keeps Turkey Spellbound,” *The New York Times*, 2 April 2018. [Online](#).

⁷⁵ Deborah Sontag, “The Erdogan Experiment,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 11 May 2003. [Online](#).

⁷⁶ At a rally in 1997, he read a poem: “The minarets are our bayonets. The faithful are our soldiers. God is great. God is great.” Quoted in Lily Rothman, “How Turkey's Erdogan First Came to Power,” *TIME*, 18 July 2016. [Online](#).

unconstitutional and banned from politics by the Constitutional Court of Turkey in 1998 because it threatened Turkey's secularism (that is, it violated the separation of state and religion).

After the dissolution of the Islamist Welfare Party, Erdoğan founded the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP) in 2001, which at the time was a moderately conservative party without an explicit religious program. AKP won by a landslide in 2002.⁷⁷ The party's initial years have often been cited as a good example of how Islam and democracy can be compatible. Early on in his career as Prime Minister (2003–2014), Erdoğan was praised as a role model for Middle Eastern countries and the post-dictatorship Arab world⁷⁸ on account of reform packages that aimed, among other changes, to expand religious freedoms and minority rights. These reforms were part of his accession negotiations with the European Union, but when these negotiations stalled,⁷⁹ Turkey's government became increasingly authoritarian. The conservative democracy of the AKP now demonstrated “a rather interesting downward spiral [...] to one-man-rule with a repressive government.”⁸⁰ For instance, the Gezi Park protests of 2013 increased levels of oppression by the AKP. Initially a demonstration against Erdoğan's plans to remove one of Istanbul's few remaining green spaces in order to

⁷⁷ Because Erdoğan was still banned from holding political office at the time, the AKP's co-founder Abdullah Gül was elected Prime Minister. He would subsequently annul Erdoğan's political ban. In 2003, Erdoğan won a by-election that would make him Prime Minister of Turkey for the next eleven years.

⁷⁸ Robert Fisk, “Has Recep Tayyip Erdogan Gone from Model Middle East ‘Strongman’ to Tin-pot Dictator?,” *Independent*, 11 April 2014. [Online](#).

⁷⁹ One of the contributing factors here was Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the 1915 genocide of the Armenians by the Ottomans.

⁸⁰ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, “An Alternative Reading of Religion and Authoritarianism: The New Logic Between Religion and State in the AKP's New Turkey,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19:1 (2019): 81.

rebuild Ottoman-era military barracks and a commercial area, these protests soon became a larger demonstration against the Turkish state.⁸¹ Another important event that took Turkey “in a decidedly more authoritarian direction” was the military’s attempted coup d’état against Erdoğan and his government in July 2016,⁸² after which he increasingly cracked down on dissent.

Erdoğan’s relationship with religion is a complex one, as will become evident in his dealings with Hagia Sophia. He was raised and educated in a religious vocational high school (an *imam hatip* school), which devotes a quarter of its curriculum to studying the Quran, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Arabic language. In 2013, Erdoğan expressed his desire to “raise a more religious generation.”⁸³ He reintroduced state-run religious schools for young children and spoke of outlawing unmarried university students of the opposite gender from living together, on or off campus. Erdoğan’s religious conservatism has also included the reconversion of museums back into mosques.

Prototypes

The 2010s saw the conversion of other Hagia Sophias in Turkey—one in Iznik, a city southeast of Istanbul, in 2012, and one in Trabzon, a city in northeastern Turkey

⁸¹ Özge Zihnioglu, “The Legacy of the Gezi Protests in Turkey,” *Carnegie Europe*, 24 October 2019. [Online](#).

⁸² Carl Bildt, “Turkey’s Approaching Crossroads,” *Project Syndicate*, 21 July 2020. [Online](#).

⁸³ Quoted in Daniel Dombey, “Call to Reinstate Hagia Sophia as Mosque,” *Financial Times*, 15 November 2013. [Online](#).

(also known by the name Trebizond), in 2013.⁸⁴ These sites have been described as “an especial battleground between secularists and Islamicists.”⁸⁵ They also served as a kind of prototype for what would transpire at Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia.

The church of Iznik had been an important seat for Christian councils in late antiquity, when the city was known by the name Nicaea. Built by Justinian I in the sixth century, this Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque when the city became a part of Ottoman territory in 1337. It eventually fell into disrepair and stood as a roofless building when the Republic of Turkey was founded. In a fashion similar to Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia, Iznik’s Hagia Sophia was made into a museum in 1935. In early 2012, it was reopened as a mosque, after Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arinç of the AKP argued that the building had never been officially converted into a museum. The reconversion of this museum into a mosque may have spurred demands to return Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia into a mosque.⁸⁶

Although not nearly as old as Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia, Trabzon’s site shares a similar history of repurposing: Established in the thirteenth century as an Orthodox Church, it was converted into a mosque in either the fifteenth or sixteenth century.⁸⁷ It was briefly used as a makeshift hospital by the Russians during and shortly after World

⁸⁴ The Empire of Trebizond, based in the city of Trebizond (from the Greek Τραπεζούς), was an offshoot of the Byzantine Empire, after the latter was devastated by the Fourth Crusade in 1204. The city and empire fell to Ottoman forces in 1461.

⁸⁵ Bigelow, “Hagia Sophia’s Tears and Smiles,” 114.

⁸⁶ Robert Ousterhout, “Hagia Sophias: From Museums to Mosques,” *The American Conservative*, 11 March 2014. [Online](#).

⁸⁷ A fifteenth-century conversion would align with Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II’s capture of the city in 1461. However, the church may have been spared conversion until the following century because the site laid several kilometers outside Trabzon’s city walls.

War I, before returning to its mosque function for several more decades. It was then made into a museum in 1964. Akin to what happened at Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, the frescoes at Trabzon's Hagia Sophia, which had been whitewashed at some point when the site was a mosque, were restored in the late 1950s by British art historian David Talbot Rice.⁸⁸ And, again akin to the situation in Istanbul, demands were made to return the museum to its mosque function.

In 2012, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, or *Diyanet* (short for *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Culture, claiming the ministry had been “illegally occupying” the site and stated that the building could not be anything other than a place of worship⁸⁹ (this language would later be echoed in the conversion of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia). Winning the case, *Diyanet* received ownership of the site and partially converted it into a mosque: an imam was hired, frescoes were covered up with drapes during prayer times, and carpets were rolled out onto the building's floors. At the reopening of the site as a mosque in 2013, Adnan Ertem, General Director of Foundations, stated the following opinion: “The population of this city consists of Muslims. If the majority are Muslims, the places of worship need to be mosques. Suppose that the majority of this city was Christians or Jews, would they keep this place as a museum?”⁹⁰ Thus, in Ertem's view, it was only logical that a population of Muslims should have access to a Muslim place of worship; the conversion of Hagia Sophia was fulfilling a need for the local population.

⁸⁸ Caroline Eden, “Turkey's Other Hagia Sophia, in Trabzon,” *The Guardian*, 25 October 2017. [Online](#).

⁸⁹ Uzey Bulut, “Trabzon's Hagia Sophia: How Converting Church to Mosque Hurts Both Religions,” *International Business Times*, 25 July 2013. [Online](#).

⁹⁰ Quoted in Bulut, “Trabzon's Hagia Sophia.”

However, disapproval came from various groups, including Greek archaeologists and the Association of Archeologists in Turkey.⁹¹ The latter released a statement, claiming: “To destroy the properties of a museum like [Trabzon’s] Hagia Sophia, which could be a candidate for world heritage, is a crime against universal culture and humanity.”⁹² The statement suggests that using the site as a mosque has inherent destructive powers and voids its World Heritage Site candidacy, thus placing religious and heritage uses at odds with one another. These various reactions demonstrate the polarizing effects of conversion.

Converting Istanbul’s Museum

Though the transformation of Iznik and Trabzon’s Hagia Sophias elicited both national and international reaction, it was rather tempered when compared to the responses invoked by the conversion of Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia. The latter was a much more renowned and well-visited museum, and its historical and religious significance as the imperial seat of both the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires made the stakes of its conversion more symbolically tangible. Though Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia would function as a museum throughout the 2010s, several events in the last decades increasingly called the site’s status into question.

⁹¹ Greek archaeologists have expressed concern over the limited access non-Muslim visitors have to the site and because Turkish authorities announced their intention to construct new buildings, which would alter the architectural style of Hagia Sophia. These archaeologists have involved the Greek branch of UNESCO in these conversations. See: Nick Kampouris, “Archaeologists Express Concern Over Future of Hagia Sophia of Trabzon,” *Greek Reporter*, 31 May 2019. [Online](#).

⁹² Quoted in Bulut, “Trabzon’s Hagia Sophia.”

For instance, in 1967, in reaction to Pope Paul VI's visit to Hagia Sophia—in which he knelt down and prayed inside the building—members of the *Milli Türk Talebe Birliği*, or National Turkish Student Association, led a protest prayer at the site. In the 1990s, the Sultan's pavilion—an annex to Hagia Sophia—opened for prayers. Starting in the early 2010s, the call to prayer (*adhān*) was played from Hagia Sophia's minarets, though it was chanted from a prayer room on the grounds, and not from inside the main building.⁹³ On 1 July 2016, for the first time in eighty-five years, the call to prayer was recited *inside* Hagia Sophia. The broadcast celebrated Laylat al-Qadr, an event that commemorates when the Quran was first sent to the world from heaven and when the book's first verses were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is widely considered Islam's holiest night of the year.⁹⁴ When Pope Benedict XVI visited Hagia Sophia in November 2016, in part as a conciliatory gesture for previous remarks he had made equating Islam with violence, his visit was not well received by many Turks.⁹⁵ Rallying in Istanbul, a crowd of almost 25,000 called Benedict an enemy of Islam and portrayed him as a symbol of Western intolerance to Muslims. Protestors chanted “No to the pope!,” “Constantinople is forever Islamic,” and “Let the chains break and Ayasofya open!”⁹⁶ A petition circulated widely, purporting to hold a million signatures demanding

⁹³ Philip Chrysopoulos, “Turkey Uses Hagia Sophia as Mosque for Islamic Prayer Again,” *Greek Reporter*, 24 March 2020. [Online](#).

⁹⁴ Philip Chrysopoulos, “First Call to Prayer from Inside Hagia Sophia in 85 Years,” *Greek Reporter*, 2 July 2016. [Online](#).

⁹⁵ Pope Benedict also attended the Blue Mosque, becoming only the second pope to have ever visited a Muslim place of worship (the first being Pope John Paul II). See: “Tens of Thousands in Turkey Protest Visit by Pope,” *The New York Times*, 26 November 2006. [Online](#).

⁹⁶ Quoted in Ian Fisher, “Pope Benedict XVI Prays at Blue Mosque in Turkey,” *The New York Times*, 30 October 2006. [Online](#). Ayasofya is the Turkish name for Hagia Sophia.

for the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.⁹⁷ As these events were taking place, rumors spread that Turkish President Kemal's signature on the decree rendering Hagia Sophia into a museum was in fact forged.⁹⁸ By the end of 2016, a full-time imam had been placed onsite.⁹⁹

On 13 May 2017, the Anatolia Youth Association¹⁰⁰ organized a large, much-publicized gathering outside Hagia Sophia and performed the morning prayer, while also calling for the reconversion of the museum into a mosque. According to the association's leader, "Keeping Ayasofya Mosque closed is an insult to our mostly Muslim population of 75 million. It symbolizes our ill-treatment by the West."¹⁰¹ The same year, the Directorate of Religious Affairs again celebrated Laylat al-Qadr inside Hagia Sophia. On 31 March 2018, President Erdoğan himself recited the first verse of the Quran in Hagia Sophia, praying for the "souls of all who left us this work as inheritance, especially

⁹⁷ Bordewich, "A Monumental Struggle."

⁹⁸ The conspiracy theory posits that, at the time of his signing, President Kemal did not yet go by the name Atatürk (a nickname or title bestowed upon him), yet he signed the decree with this name. Furthermore, the signature is unlike his classical signature. Responses to this theory counterargue that this decree is the first instance in which Kemal used the title Atatürk. Moreover, given this was a new name, he had not yet established the exact signature he would use in subsequent documents. More importantly, however, the president visited Hagia Sophia on 6 February 1934, five days after it opened up as a museum, and therefore experienced Hagia Sophia in its new secular role.

⁹⁹ Ziad Jamaledine, "Hagia Sophia Past and Present," *Places Journal*, August 2020. [Online](#).

¹⁰⁰ The Anatolia Youth Association, or *Anadolu Gençlik Derneği*, is an organization whose mandate is to raise the next generation of Turks to be engaged, knowledgeable, and faithful citizens.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Ousterhout, "Hagia Sophias." According to several sources, the association has apparently collected about 15 million signatures in a petition requesting that Hagia Sophia be turned into a mosque. See, for instance: Umar Farooq, "Voices Grow Louder in Turkey to Convert Hagia Sophia from a Museum Back to Mosque," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 2017. [Online](#).

Istanbul's conqueror.”¹⁰² Thus, although still a museum, Hagia Sophia had in some ways become a site for religious practice, albeit still limited and restricted.

International criticism of these demands and practices was swift, especially from the Greek press and government. For instance, on 13 November 2013, a statement by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared:

The repeated statements from Turkish officials regarding the conversion of Byzantine Christian churches into mosques are an insult to the religious sensibilities of millions of Christians and are actions that are anachronistic and incomprehensible from a state that declares it wants to participate as a full member in the European Union, a fundamental principle of which is respect for religious freedom. Byzantine Christian churches are an intrinsic element of world cultural and religious heritage, and they should receive the necessary respect and protection.¹⁰³

Another statement from 6 June 2016 strongly bifurcates Muslim religious space and world heritage sites (the latter being understood as secular in nature): “Obsessions, verging on bigotry, with Muslim rituals in a monument of world cultural heritage are incomprehensible and reveal a lack of respect for and connection with reality. Such actions are not compatible with modern, democratic and secular societies.”¹⁰⁴

Reconversion of the mosque was thus viewed as disrespectful towards Christians and to modern concepts of secularism and world heritage. Interestingly, these kinds of statements seem to disregard how the “monument[s] of world cultural heritage” on Greek soil, like the Rotunda, at times operate as Orthodox religious spaces. Thus, the issue is

¹⁰² Quoted in Zeynep Bilginsoy, “Turkish President Recites Muslim Prayer at Hagia Sophia,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 31 March 2018. [Online](#).

¹⁰³ Quoted in “Greece Angered Over Turkish Deputy PM’s Hagia Sophia Remarks,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19 November 2013. [Online](#). The statement was posted to the *Hellenic Republic Ministry of Public Affairs* website but appears to have since been removed.

¹⁰⁴ “Foreign Ministry Announcement Regarding the Scheduling by Turkish Authorities of a Koran Reading in Hagia Sophia,” *Hellenic Republic Ministry of Public Affairs*, 6 June 2016. [Online](#).

perhaps less about religious practice at secular sites than about *Muslim* religious practice at secular, formerly Christian, sites.¹⁰⁵

The years 2019 and 2020 marked a demonstrable difference in how the state, and especially Erdoğan, approached the status of Hagia Sophia. Though the president stated in early 2019 he would not convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque when so many of Turkey's active mosques failed to fill up, other statements he made the same year suggested otherwise.¹⁰⁶ For instance, he pledged to reconvert Hagia Sophia in Turkey's March 2019 local elections, claiming he would return the building "to its original state."¹⁰⁷ But of course the original state of Hagia Sophia is not a mosque, but a church. This bizarre claim has been repeated elsewhere, erasing the site's Byzantine history and making conversion appear more logical.¹⁰⁸

The same month, Erdoğan stated that Hagia Sophia's conversion into a museum had been "a great mistake."¹⁰⁹ His government also claimed that the recent desire to see it

¹⁰⁵ Though this project primarily focuses on the interactions between religious and secular readings of and engagements with historic sites, I do want to acknowledge that other factors play a crucial role in the active dissonance over the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, including Islamophobia. To name Muslim religious use of a World Heritage site as "verging on bigotry" is to reveal an important discomfort or outright aversion to Islam. As I noted earlier in this project, Greek-Turkish relations have long been strained, in large part due to the complex Byzantine-Ottoman (and Christian-Muslim) history that continues to inform Greek and Turkish identity and politics today.

¹⁰⁶ Erdoğan stated: "First you should fill the Blue Mosque next door. Go to the Camlica Mosque we built. Fill that one." Quoted in Ragip Soylu, "Erdogan Vows to Convert Hagia Sophia into Mosque in Riposte to Trump," *Middle East Eye*, 27 March 2019. [Online](#).

¹⁰⁷ The full statement reads: "We said we would lift Hagia Sophia's museum status and return it to its original state [*sic*] and call it a mosque." Quoted in Soylu, "Erdogan Vows to Convert Hagia Sophia."

¹⁰⁸ Turkey's Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gül stated: "Naturally, [converting] Hagia Sophia [into a mosque] has been a dream for all of us. To be able to experience this excites us greatly. God willing, *we will see the return of Hagia Sophia to its origin*." Quoted in "Turkish Media Report Hagia Sophia is Being Converted into a Mosque," *Greek City Times*, 8 July 2020. [Online](#). My emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Ayla Jean Yackley, "Erdogan Says Museum and Former Cathedral Hagia Sophia Will Become Mosque Again," *The Art Newspaper*, 29 March 2019. [Online](#).

converted into a mosque was the will of the Turkish people. A survey conducted by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Erdoğan's political party, claimed that 90% of its voter base and of far-right Nationalist Movement Party voters (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) supported making Hagia Sophia into a mosque, with 70% of secularist Good Party voters (*İYİ Parti*) and 40% of the Republican People's Party voters (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, the main opposition party) agreeing as well.¹¹⁰

A few reasons informed this heightened interest in converting Hagia Sophia, and I will identify two here. First, an already stagnant Turkish economy was put under further pressure by the COVID-19 pandemic that began its global spread in early 2020. Income from tourism fell dramatically (up to a 97% decrease), thousands of jobs were lost, and exports to Europe declined rapidly in the first half of the year.¹¹¹ As a result, Erdoğan was losing voter support. Second, splits in his political party threatened to draw away some of his conservative voting base, and his former Finance Minister Ali Babacan and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu formed their own political parties. Erdoğan's renewed focus on Hagia Sophia, then, was deemed by several of his opponents to be a political move aimed at keeping or gaining voters. For instance, journalist Turkmen Terzi, writing in June 2020, noted: "Political analysts now contend that the Hagia Sophia issue is Erdoğan's last chance to keep his voter base under the strain of economic and political turmoil; it is a clever and timely diversion."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ "AKP Says Voters Support Hagia Sophia Conversion Plans," *Ekathimerini*, 18 June 2020. [Online](#).

¹¹¹ Turkmen Terzi, "Will European Protests Prevent the Hagia Sophia Museum Becoming a Mosque?" *Middle Eastern Monitor*, 17 June 2020. [Online](#).

¹¹² Terzi, "Will European Protests Prevent."

Thus, the question of Hagia Sophia’s “rightful” status and function was embroiled in bigger questions of politics. Much like its conversion into a museum in the 1930s was used as a symbol for Turkey’s adoption of secularism, its conversion into a mosque would symbolize the religious revival of Turkish society. Given the fact that religious sentiment never left Turkey but was quieted and restricted, Erdoğan’s push to convert Hagia Sophia acknowledged a population that had long felt disenfranchised by a secular government. This act hoped to secure their support. Hagia Sophia therefore serves as evidence that architecture—and heritage—is almost always political.¹¹³

In July 2020, the 10th Chamber of the Council of State maintained that the 1934 cabinet decree converting Hagia Sophia into a museum was an illegal document and therefore annulled it, paving the way to return the site to worship.¹¹⁴ Why had the cabinet decree been deemed illegal? The answer lies in the title deed for Hagia Sophia. When Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II and his forces took over the city of Istanbul in 1453, Mehmed

¹¹³ Scholars and architects acknowledge the powerful effects of architecture. Aris Roussinos, for instance, writes: “Architecture is an inherently political act, which is precisely why it is so contested.” In “Why Architecture is Political,” *UnHerd*, 28 December 2020. [Online](#).

¹¹⁴ The judicial process that informed this decision was at least fifteen years in the making. In 2005, for instance, the Association of Foundations and Service to Historical Artefacts and the Environment brought a lawsuit with the Council of State over the status of Hagia Sophia. The Association demanded that the Council strike down the 1934 cabinet decree and suspend its execution, but on 24 June 2005, the 10th Chamber of the Council of State rejected to annul the cabinet decree. In 2008, the Council dismissed the case, stating that using Hagia Sophia as a museum did not pose any contradiction in law. In 2016, the Association once again filed a lawsuit with the Council of State. In 2018, the Turkish Constitutional Court ruled on the Association’s individual application, which alleged that the freedom of religion was in violation because the request to open Hagia Sophia to worship had been previously denied. This application was rejected by the high court, citing “lack of jurisdiction without any examination.”

There were signs that suggested the Council of State would rule in favor of annulling the decree in 2020. Just the year before, in 2019, the same court ruled that the museum status of Chora, a heritage site with a similar history as that of Hagia Sophia (it, too, was a Byzantine church which had been converted into a mosque and eventually into a museum), should be revoked. Furthermore, there was also the conversion of other Hagia Sophia buildings in Iznik and Trabzon, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Finally, recent Muslim celebrations and readings of the Quran inside Hagia Sophia also suggested that the building would be converted next.

immediately converted Hagia Sophia into a mosque. According to the court’s full ruling, the site was owned by a foundation established by Mehmed and the title deed to the site defined it a “mosque.” The Council of State ruled that this status could not be legally changed and therefore Hagia Sophia could not be legally used as anything other than a mosque.

This ruling did not automatically change the legal status of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Rather, by invalidating the 1934 cabinet decree, it allowed the government to make this conversion. Only hours after the ruling was announced to the public on 10 July 2020, Erdoğan ordered Hagia Sophia Museum to be converted into a working mosque, which was renamed “The Grand Hagia Sophia Mosque.” He presented this change as “Hagia Sophia breaking away from its captivity chains,” “the greatest dream of our youth,” and “the yearning of our people.”¹¹⁵ At the same time, he assured the public that Hagia Sophia would “maintain its status as a cultural heritage of humanity.”¹¹⁶ Hagia Sophia Mosque, according to the president, would remain open to non-Muslims and “continue to embrace everyone.”¹¹⁷ Hagia Sophia Mosque was transferred away from the

¹¹⁵ Quoted in “Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia Reopens as a Mosque for First Time in 86 Years,” *France 24*, 24 July 2020. [Online](#).

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Marc Champion and Constantine Courcoulas, “Erdogan Asserts Rebirth of an Islamic Turkey at Hagia Sophia,” *Financial Post*, 11 July 2020. [Online](#).

¹¹⁷ The whole statement reads: “Hagia Sophia’s doors will be, as is the case with all our mosques, wide open to all, whether they be foreign or local, Muslim or non-Muslim. With its new status, Hagia Sophia, the shared heritage of humanity, will continue to embrace all in a much more sincere and original way.” In “With its New Status, Hagia Sophia, the Shared Heritage of Humanity, Will Continue to Embrace All,” *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye*, 10 July 2020. [Online](#).

Ministry of Culture and Tourism to the Directorate of Religious Affairs.¹¹⁸ The same day, thousands of Muslim worshippers prayed outside Hagia Sophia, in celebration.¹¹⁹

Critics claimed that Hagia Sophia, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, had an international character and status that was not compatible with its use as a mosque. Greek Foreign Minister George Katrougalos, for instance, stated: “Any questioning of this status is not just an insult to the sentiments of Christians, it is an insult to the international community and international law.”¹²⁰ This emphasis on the international implications of Hagia Sophia’s mosque status were echoed by other commentators. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, expert on Greek-Turkish relations at Istanbul’s Kadir Has University, stated: “Hagia Sophia is a museum and a world heritage site. It is protected by UNESCO. The status of the monument is *not a Greek or Turkish thing; it is an international issue.*”¹²¹ As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, he suggests, Hagia Sophia’s significance is not decided by Turks (or even Greeks). Rather, it should be decided by the global community. Foreign Minister of France, Jean-Yves le Drian, said that “These decisions cast doubt on one of the most symbolic acts of modern and secular Turkey.”¹²²

Support or criticism for Hagia Sophia’s conversion did not sit neatly along religious and secular, or Christian and Muslim, lines. On the one hand, politicians and

¹¹⁸ Merrit Kennedy and Peter Kenyon, “Turkey Converts Istanbul’s Iconic Hagia Sophia back Into a Mosque,” *NPR*, 10 July 2020. [Online](#).

¹¹⁹ Champion and Courcoulas, “Erdogan Asserts Rebirth.”

¹²⁰ Quoted in Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Turkey’s Plans for Hagia Sophia Strain Greek Relations,” *Balkan Insight*, 17 June 2020. [Online](#).

¹²¹ Quoted in Buyuk, “Turkey’s Plans for Hagia Sophia Strain Greek Relations.” My emphasis.

¹²² Quoted in “World Council of Churches ‘Dismayed’ Turkish President Converted Hagia Sophia Back to a Mosque,” *CBS News*, 11 July 2020. [Online](#).

religious groups in the world's largest Muslim nations, Pakistan and Indonesia, welcomed the change. In a letter to Erdoğan, Siraj ul Haq, the Chief of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami, a religious political party, stated that the conversion "warmed hearts of Muslims all around the world and particularly in Pakistan."¹²³ He framed the decision as a reversal of "the injustice committed decades back," in reference to Hagia Sophia's museum status.¹²⁴ On the other hand, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawki Allam, ruled that the conversion was "impermissible,"¹²⁵ reminding Muslims that they were commanded to preserve churches.¹²⁶ Then again, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople Sahak II—a Christian leader—supported the decision, stating, "I believe that believers' praying better suits the spirit of the temple instead of curious tourists running around to take pictures."¹²⁷

¹²³ Quoted in "Pakistan, Indonesia Hail Turkey's Move to Reconvert Hagia Sophia into Mosque," *The EurAsian Times*, 15 July 2020. [Online](#).

¹²⁴ Quoted in "Pakistan, Indonesia Hail Turkey's Move." Haq's statement was in part a response to the 2019 ruling by India's Supreme Court, which ordered the land on which the Babri Mosque had once stood (before its destruction by a national Hindu mob in 1992) to be handed over to a trust that would build a Hindu temple. The month after Haq wrote his letter, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the cornerstones of the new temple. See: Lauren Frayer and Sushmita Pathak, "At Site of Razed Mosque, India's Modi Lays Foundation for Controversial Hindu Temple," *NPR*, 5 August 2020. [Online](#).

¹²⁵ Quoted in "Mufti of Egypt Says Turkey's Hagia Sophia Mosque Conversion is 'Forbidden'," *The New Arab*, 18 July 2020. [Online](#). According to the article, "Churches and mosques must be preserved around the world, as has been the case during the entirety of Egypt's history, Shawky Allam said, making reference to a previous fatwa by Laith bin Saad Fakih of Egypt who ruled that churches are part of earth's architecture in Islam."

¹²⁶ Shawki Allam stated in a televised interview: "We [as Muslims] are commanded to preserve churches [...] Prophet Muhammad (peace and Blessings be upon him) was always recommending in wars not to destroy temples or kill monks." Quoted in "In Pics: Turkish Hagia Sophia Opens for 1st Muslim Prayer in 86 Years," *Egypt Today*, 24 July 2020. [Online](#). Square brackets in the original.

¹²⁷ Quoted in "Armenian Patriarch Backs Opening of Hagia Sophia to Worship," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 14 June 2020. [Online](#). Sahak also supported a shared use of Hagia Sophia by Christians and Muslims, stating: "Let Hagia Sophia turn into a symbol of peace of humanity." Quoted in John Burger, "Armenian Leader in Turkey Suggests Muslims and Christians Share Hagia Sophia," *Aleteia*, 18 June 2020. [Online](#).

De-Secularization

Recent events at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia challenge the secularization theory proposed by nineteenth-century sociologists, which posited that societies become more secular as they modernize. Under this theory, the demands to remake these heritage places into religious sites may be read as signs of societal regression, the requests of an eclectic minority, and/or as an abnormal counterexample. However, recent scholarship has demonstrated the ways in which religion is an important constituent of modern communities throughout the world. The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia thus reveal how heritage places have become an important locus for negotiating the role and practice of religion in the public sphere. In line with the “counternarrative heritage” trend I identified in the Part I Introduction, these two case study sites expose the ways in which religious groups view themselves as the marginalized or forgotten voices in the management of religious heritage—even when they may represent a population majority. Though the secularization of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia was initially a celebration of national and universal heritage, it has also been framed by increasingly vocal stakeholders as an assault on the freedom to worship and of religious expression.

In some ways, conflict over their use and identity begs an important question: Is the secularization of religious sites a violation of the human right to worship? For some groups, it would seem so. However, there are many other churches and mosques available for worship in Thessaloniki and Istanbul, respectively. The perceived need to use the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as religious places is thus not driven by a lack of alternative Christian and Muslim spaces. Instead, these debates are about representation, as well as religious and political legitimacy. I argue that these sites’ religious character and

function—or lack thereof—is a bellwether of religion’s role in Thessaloniki and Istanbul, as well as Greece and Turkey more broadly.

The events narrated in this chapter not only demonstrate a resistance to the concept of secularism as well (that is, the separation of religion and state), but they also reveal how secularism can be adapted.¹²⁸ For instance, rather than challenge the Turkish constitutional principle of *laiklik* (from the French *laïcité*, or “secularism”), the AKP has redefined secularism as a guarantee of religious freedom, thereby allowing it to actualize the demands of its religious base, according to journalist Mustafa Aycol.¹²⁹ That is, instead of keeping a strict separation of state and religion, as found in the French context, Turkey has turned to an American form of secularism, which guarantees a right to religion. In other words, “freedom of religion” as freedom *from* religion has become a right *to* religion. Rather than use “restraint” when it comes to matters of religion—as the dean of Aristotle University’s Theological School recommended when residents demanded religious access to the Rotunda, and which seems to have been first President of Turkey Kemal’s motto—politicians have found ways to make religious practices and the conversion of religious buildings sit within a secular legal framework.

In the case of the Rotunda, stakeholders renegotiated the boundaries between the state and the Orthodox Church. Personalities like Tassias and Anthimos attempted to reassert the church’s authority in what they considered to be important religious matters, thus forcing the state, represented through local and state politicians as well as

¹²⁸ Secularism refers to the philosophy or state policy, whereas secularization refers to the process for enacting this philosophy or policy.

¹²⁹ Aycol, “Turkey’s Troubled Experiment with Secularism.”

archaeologists, to defend their ownership and decision-making abilities over what they saw as a secular issue—the management and protection of cultural heritage. The high courts intervened in the Church’s ad hoc use of the Rotunda (which relied on the Ninth Ephoria to grant it access) by permitting its liturgical use twelve times a year, thus giving the Church a *legal right* to practice religion inside a state-run secular space. The separation between state and religion have become much blurrier.

Conflicts over the use of these two sites not only reflect a concern for religious access, but they also demonstrate the power of religious objects. In the case of the Rotunda, debate erupted over *adding* objects to the site—the Holy Table and the “ancient inauguration” inside the building, the cross atop the roof—whereas Hagia Sophia’s conversion evoked concern over their (visual) *removal*, with the Byzantine mosaics taking center stage in these debates. These conflicts reveal how religious material artifacts have the ability to change the nature of a site, in the eyes of both religious and non-religious stakeholders. In other words, these objects have a kind of sacred aura,¹³⁰ and are alternatively worshipped or destroyed or hidden because of their power over a place.¹³¹ Much like the charisma of certain individuals impacted debates over the use and

¹³⁰ In his influential essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin described aura as a property that lives in genuine or original artifacts, an attribute which they gain through their presence in time and space. Mechanical reproductions of artworks, on the other hand, lack this aura or unique cultural context. In *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 211–244.

¹³¹ Within the Christian tradition, the interaction between the visual representation of the divine and the religious practice of veneration represents what S. Brent Plate has termed “religious seeing.” Piety and respect are expressed to the gods through the veneration of their images (*Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* [New York: Palgrave, 2002], 11). David Morgan deploys the term “sacred gaze” to identify “the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance” (*The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005], 3). Given the gaze is “a projection of conventions that enables certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience, and certain relations among participants” (4),

identity of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, so too, does the charisma of religious artifacts have powerful effects on these conflicts.¹³²

Several scholars have explored the ways in which religious objects lose their aura or become de-sacralized when they are placed in a museum context, converted into artworks through their display in secular (or secularizing) spaces.¹³³ The example of the Rotunda demonstrates the ways in which introducing religious objects into a museum has the power to *re-sanctify*. The re-sanctification of Hagia Sophia reveals the ways in which objects in a secular space once again take on religious meaning after conversion. Thought to encourage the worship of idols, such images are veiled in order to curb their powerful capacity. The relationship between religious objects and museums is a complex, highly negotiable, and ever evolving one.

As of 2021, there are notable differences between the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia. The Rotunda primarily functions as a monument and museum, something that site attendants emphasized on my multiple visits to the site. Its occasional use for liturgical services does not impact—or is not intended to impact—the character of the site. Hagia

curtailing access to an image negatively affects some of the ways in which Christians can participate in religious activity.

¹³² Referring to people’s willingness to risk their lives to save the relics in Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris when it caught fire in April 2020, Martin Radermacher writes that such objects “have an agency that becomes visible in the actions undertaken to save them but also in centuries of preservation and veneration” (“From ‘Fetish’ to ‘Aura’: The Charisma of Objects?,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 12:2 [2019]: 167). He defines charismatic objects as “those objects that are over longer periods of time explicitly addressed as special or extraordinary in religious discourse and practice, that have an attractiveness and, thus, become socially effective. In other words, they make people do something because they are valued as ‘sacred’ or ‘auratic’” (168). Objects like the Holy Table inside the Rotunda risk such powerful effects, drastically changing the character of the space, which is precisely why religious artifacts can be an important aspect of conflict over religious heritage.

¹³³ Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Sophia's identity, on the other hand, is as a mosque. Its ongoing museum qualities—described in the next chapter—are not a reflection of the site's current character, but rather an enduring quality of its former status. Much like religious objects and museums, the relationship between religion, secularization, and heritage places today is multifaceted and dynamic.

Chapter 5: Religious Encounters with Heritage

“The Hagia Sophia was profaned by secularism in 1935. For secularism is not a way for all religions to share the public space peacefully; it is a systematic and deliberate attempt to drive God out of the public square.”¹

In Chapter 4, I examined the events and charismatic leaders that enabled the religious use of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia in the past quarter century. In this chapter, I lead a virtual tour through these sites in the present-time, pointing out what transformations occurred in order to generate religious places and service religious communities. In the case of the Rotunda, which only occasionally functions as a church, I consider how its space can be temporarily made religious—only to be unmade again at the end of the day. I ask: How are we to understand the boundaries between these different identities of the site, the temporary suspension or introduction of one use over another? I turn to scholarship on the geography of religion and sacred space to argue that the Rotunda’s sacredness is provisionally reframed along religious lines when it is used for ecclesiastical purposes.

With Hagia Sophia, which now fully operates as a mosque, I investigate the rapid ways in which the site has been architecturally and ritualistically adapted and I identify what aspects have changed—or not changed—in order to continue servicing non-Muslim, non-religious visitors. I demonstrate that, in some important respects, Hagia Sophia continues to operate as a museum. It is therefore a liminal space in which religion, performance, exhibition, and education coalesce to create a religious heritage place quite unlike the other grand mosques of Istanbul.

¹ Giles Fraser, Priest-in-Charge of St. Mary’s in south London, quoted in Florian George Calian, “The Hagia Sophia and Turkey’s Neo-Ottomanism,” *The Armenian Weekly*, 24 March 2021. [Online](#).

Hand-in-hand with Chapter 4, this chapter reveals the physical, visual, and conceptual boundaries stakeholders carve out for religious engagements with the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia today. Such an examination aims to illuminate how religion in the modern world is negotiated at and through heritage sites, with an eye towards the preservative and destructive trends that different uses of sites may embody. The secularization theory has failed in many ways, and (dissonant) heritage sites are an important locus for identifying how various stakeholders negotiate the role of religion in society more broadly.

Throughout this chapter, I deploy “visitors” as a more neutral term to refer to those who go to the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, in order to avoid ascribing any intention to their visit. This is in contrast to popular media outlets, which are often anxious to maintain a separation between spiritually motivated travelers (pilgrims) and those without religious intentions (tourists).² The titles of a sampling of online articles reveal this anxiety: “A Pilgrim is Not a Tourist” and “How to Travel Like a Pilgrim, Not a Tourist.”³ On these platforms, pilgrimage is often portrayed as more meaningful than tourism,⁴

² For classic studies on Christian pilgrimage and what makes a pilgrim, see: Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (eds.), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³ “A Pilgrim is Not a Tourist,” *See The Holy Land*, n.d., [Online](#); “How to Travel Like a Pilgrim, Not a Tourist,” *Human Pursuits*, n.d., [Online](#).

⁴ The *See the Holy Land* website claims that, even if pilgrims and tourists share the same itinerary, their journeys are in fact quite different: “The outcome of the pilgrimage will be the *transformation* that has taken place inside the person.” The tourist, on the other hand, will be the same person after their visit, save, perhaps, “for a broadened mind” (“A Pilgrim is Not a Tourist.” Emphasis in the original). The *Human Pursuits* website states: “The tourist is often seeking an escape *from* reality, whereas the pilgrim is seeking a deeper experience *of* reality” (“How to Travel Like a Pilgrim.” Emphasis in the original). Thus, the concerns of the pilgrim are other-worldly oriented, or internally oriented, while those of the tourist are this-worldly oriented, or externally oriented.

more respectful,⁵ less structured and more rejuvenating,⁶ more focused on the here and now,⁷ and overall much more transformational.⁸ Participants must make themselves worthy of the experience.⁹ However, the distinction between pilgrims and tourists—or other cognate terms such as worshippers, believers, the faithful, or travelers, museum-goers¹⁰—are not easily distinguishable at sites like the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, as the length of the journey and the motivations for the visit are especially blurry on account of the ongoing mixed use of space.¹¹ Indeed, I argue that this distinction appears to pivot on

⁵ The *See the Holy Land* website states: “The pilgrim *treads lightly* on sacred ground and on the planet. The tourist may unknowingly trample on holy ground or intrude noisily into sacred stillness. The pilgrim is sensitive and respectful” (“A Pilgrim is Not a Tourist.” Emphasis in the original). In other words, the tourist appears completely oblivious, almost belligerent and all consuming, whereas the pilgrim is portrayed as embodying quiet, reflective, Protestant-like practices and ideals.

⁶ The *Human Pursuits* claims, in all uppercase letters, “TOURISTS OVER-PLAN, PILGRIMS WAIT ON WHIMSY” (“How to Travel Like a Pilgrim”). The *Art of Living* website further echoes this divide: “A tourist gets tired and tanned, while a pilgrim sparkles with spirit. Every move a pilgrim makes is with sacredness and gratitude, while a tourist is often preoccupied and unaware.” In “Are You a Tourist or a Pilgrim?,” *The Art of Living*, n.d. [Online](#).

⁷ The *Art of Living* website proclaims: “A tourist compares with other experiences and places and hence is not in the present moment. But a pilgrim has a sense of sacredness, so he tends to be in the present moment.” In “Are You a Tourist or a Pilgrim?”

⁸ Doris Donnelly claims: “The focus for the pilgrim is to be affected by the pilgrimage, while the tourist seeks to be untouched by his/her experiences.” Indeed, “Tourists make a conscious decision to be unaffected, untouched, and unaltered by their new surroundings.” In “Pilgrims and Tourists: Conflict Metaphors for the Christian Journey to God,” *Spirituality Today* 44:1 (1992): 21, 26.

⁹ In a blog post, T.S. Bremer claims that tourists “delight in consuming the aesthetic experience of sacred power” rather than make themselves “worthy of the sacramental presence.” Ultimately, “the pilgrim seeks a self worthy of the experience, [whereas] the tourist seeks experiences worthy of the self.” In “Pilgrim or Tourist: How Do We Know the Difference?,” 8 November 2017. [Online](#).

¹⁰ Terms like pilgrims, travelers, and tourists suggest a travel aspect to the visitor experience, whereas terms like worshippers, the faithful, and museum-goers do not necessarily insinuate long-distance travel (though they do not deny this aspect either). Those who visit the Rotunda for religious services are likely to be local community members, whereas those who visit Hagia Sophia for the same reason may be locals or come from across the country and the broader Middle Eastern area. The term visitors thus not only avoids ascribing intention to the visit, it also avoids assumptions about the journey that led to the visit.

¹¹ The anxiety for maintaining a clear boundary between pilgrims and tourists is rife, precisely because it is blurrier in reality. Frank Fahey writes: “The pilgrim is always in danger of becoming a tourist. But equally true the tourist is constantly running the risk of becoming a pilgrim” (“Pilgrims or Tourists?” *The Furrow* 53:4 [2002]: 218). The two groups are different, I argue, because they *want to be*.

how *authentic* the experiences are *perceived* to be.¹² The term visitors is intended to circumvent any supposedly neat boundaries in use at these sites. The dissonance activated at the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia is in part a result of differing visitor expectations of site experiences. Thus, although I deploy the term visitors, I acknowledge that other terms like worshippers and tourists can have important, on-the-ground currency to stakeholders (that is, they may distinguish themselves or others along these lines).

The Rotunda and Thessaloniki

In Chapter 4, I described the infamous piano incident that took place inside the Rotunda in October 1995, when church members, who had been holding a vigil outside the building, stormed in as a jazz concert was taking place and chaos and violence ensued. This dark spot in the city's history is in stark contrast to my more recent visits to the site in 2017, 2018, and 2021, when the Rotunda clearly functioned as a monument and museum. Visitors paid an entry fee, there were informational panels and brochures explaining the site's significance, and visitors could see an exposed archaeological site that displayed some of the ancient features of the building.

In April 2019, I visited the Rotunda on Orthodox Good Friday,¹³ when religious services were offered onsite to visitors. The experience showcased how the Rotunda had come to successfully function as a hybrid space. When I came to the gated property that

¹² That is, for those intent on differentiating pilgrims from tourists, pilgrimage is oftentimes presented as a more authentic experience of a sacred site. The notion of authenticity cuts across religious heritage discourses in significant and important ways, something I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6.

¹³ Generally, Orthodox churches use the Julian calendar to determine the date for Easter, while Western churches use the Gregorian calendar. This means that Easter is celebrated at different times by different Christian populations.

spring day, the rope that ushered visitors toward the cashier's office to pay the entrance fee was now gone. Visitors now had a direct line of access to the Rotunda's main entrance (which sits to the northwest of the site) and could enter and exit the site as they pleased, for free. According to the site attendant, anyone was welcome to attend, regardless of whether they participated in the ecclesiastical services. In other words, the Rotunda, which normally functions as a museum, was on this visit set aside—though not exclusively—for religious activity.¹⁴ It was actively and simultaneously a religious place and a heritage site.

The normally minimalist space was now filled with icons, candles, chairs, tables, and other items not typically present when the Rotunda is open as a museum. Prior to entering the building, visitors now encountered two colorful, modern icons, one depicting St. George (with whom the Rotunda is often associated) and the other, depicting the archangels Michael and Gabriel with a center medallion portraying Mary and infant Christ (Figures 27–28). To the left of the St. George icon were candles that could be purchased for a donation, and sitting between the two icons was a sand-filled gold plate filled where one could place lit candles. An attendant monitored the area, occasionally using glass cleaner to wipe down the icons (which were images protected by a glass frame), removing the residue left from visitors' kisses. These religious items were not unlike those found in other churches in Thessaloniki that day.

¹⁴ The days that the Rotunda temporarily transforms into a church can be difficult to determine. When I spoke with site attendants on the Dormition of the Virgin Mary in 2021 about the schedule—having expected the site to offer church services for such an important day in the Orthodox calendar—they did not know when the Rotunda would next be a church. The Rotunda, they confirmed, “is today a monument.” None of the information, to my knowledge, is advertised online.

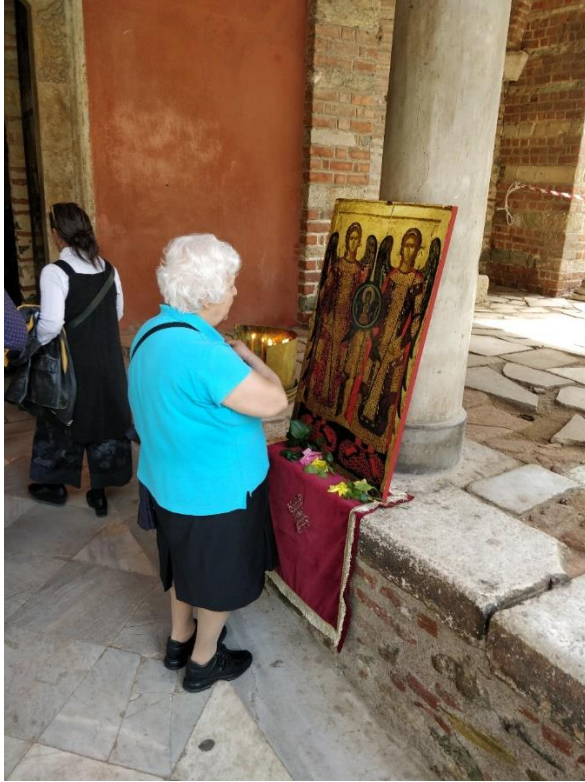


Figure 27: An icon depicting the archangels Michael and Gabriel temporarily sits outside the Rotunda for Good Friday liturgical services (2019).



Figure 28: An icon of St. George and candles located outside the Rotunda (2019).

More religious objects were located inside the Rotunda. In front of the building's central apse (a semicircular recess with a domed roof) were a large wooden cross, topped with a wreath, and a table with the *Epitaphios* (Ἐπιτάφιος in Greek), a religious icon used in the last two days of Holy Week (that is, the two days before Easter Sunday) (Figures 29–30).¹⁵ A Gospel Book and a chalice veil were placed on top of the *Epitaphios*. The table was further decked with a canopy entirely decorated with bright, colorful spring flowers, called a *kouvouklion* (Κουβούκλιον in Greek), representing the tomb of Christ. The typically empty floor was covered with rows of chairs, divided by a wide middle aisle that gave easy physical and visual access to the *Epitaphios* and cross. To the sides of the central apse were two modern icons; the left one depicted Mary and infant Christ and the right one depicted adult Christ holding a book.

These objects that now filled the Rotunda are not normally present in the space—save one sole icon of Christ, which sits in the central apse even when the site is open as a museum (Figure 31). This object is used during the occasional ecclesiastical services, but its lingering presence during non-liturgical services is revealing. It is not a heavy object—unlike the Holy Table that sits behind it—and therefore its continued presence in the space seems intentional rather than out of necessity. The icon certainly serves as a visual reminder of the Rotunda's Christian identity. Whether visitors contextualize this identity in the past (the Rotunda *used to be* a church) or in the present (the Rotunda currently *is* a church) is a different matter. But on this Good Friday morning, the objects that filled the building left no doubt as to what kind of place the Rotunda was that day. It was a church, as some Thessalonians proudly remarked during my visit.

¹⁵ The *Epitaphios* consists of an embroidered and richly adorned cloth, bearing an image of Christ's body being prepared for burial following his removal from the cross.

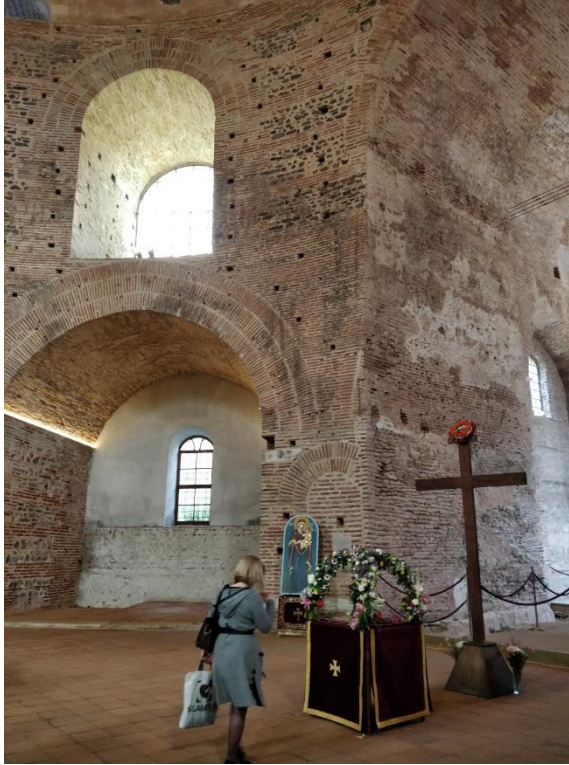


Figure 29: A large wooden cross, topped with a wreath, and a table with the *Epitaphios* are temporarily set up inside the Rotunda (2019).

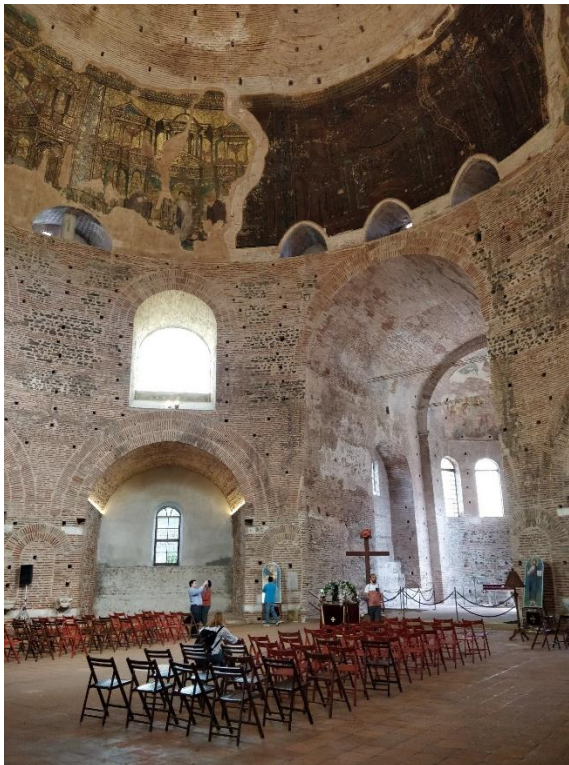


Figure 30: Rows of chairs and religious objects inside the Rotunda (2019).

A few museum-like features of the Rotunda were removed or restricted, thus reframing the visitor's experience in significant ways. In one apse is a television that normally plays a movie on loop, discussing the building's history and highlighting its mosaics. On this day, it was turned off. This had an obvious practical dimension—to avoid distracting visitors from the liturgical services performed in the Rotunda—but it also directed attention away from the site's monument status (which the video highlights). The doors to the right of the central apse, which leads to the archaeological area of the site, were closed off. Visitors were only permitted direct access in and out of the building from the main gate, while the rest of the site was barred. This restricted access to the archaeological site again directed attention away from the Rotunda's monument status. Instead, visitors' engagement was structured by a religious experience or a religious interpretation of the site. Thus, it was not only the addition of religious objects or the performance of liturgical rituals that made the site temporarily religious, but also the circumvention of other experiences. When it is used for church services, different readings of the Rotunda become more difficult.

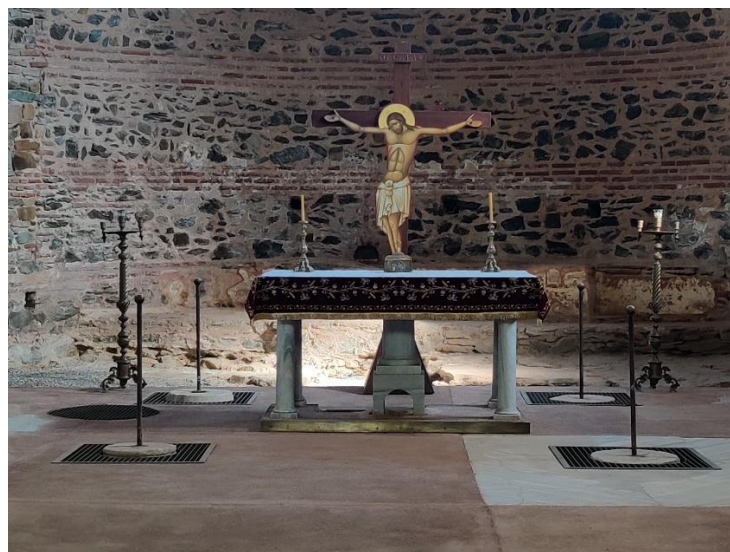


Figure 31: An icon of Christ remains on display in the Rotunda's apse, even outside non-liturgical events (2021).

On this April 2019 day, I spent hours at the Rotunda observing how visitors engaged with the space. Patterns quickly emerged, in line with routines and customs one would typically expect to see at other Greek Orthodox churches on Good Friday. Many visitors kissed the various icons, as well as the wooden cross. On busier times of the day, visitors would line up to kiss the *Epitaphios* and Gospel Book. A few visitors would get on their hands and knees and crawl underneath the table vertically and then horizontally.¹⁶ After these rituals, many if not most visitors spent time observing the site, pointing to the mosaics, and taking an abundance of pictures, especially of themselves in front of the icons. Some visitors did not participate in these practices, with the exception of taking photographs, which may suggest that their visit was unrelated to the Good Friday services.

For the evening service, the chairs that had been previously set up in the space were removed. The building filled up with standing visitors, unlike the constant flow of visitors in and out of the Rotunda earlier in the day (Figure 32). In line with church services across Thessaloniki, the priests performed the Good Friday rituals before the crowd. After some time, the priests carried the table with the *Epitaphios* and *kouvouklion* as well as the wooden cross out of the building, with the crowd following suit in a solemn procession. They slowly circumambulated the Rotunda, with the table and cross presiding in front (Figure 33). Eventually the crowd converged with another group who had done

¹⁶ According to Giorgos Papantoniou and Athanasios K. Vionis, in many parts of Greece and Cyprus, crawling underneath the *Epitaphios* is intended to secure health in the coming year. They write: “This custom is an informal, non-institutional layer (i.e., not part of the formal ritual proceedings), bringing to the forefront folk and personal agencies related to the materiality of the *Epitaphios* cult. The folk tradition of crawling under the *Epitaphios* is an example of the merging of popular medicine and religious healing in Orthodox Christianity.” In “Popular Religion and Material Responses to Pandemic: The Christian Cult of the *Epitaphios* During the COVID-19 Crisis in Greece and Cyprus,” *Ethnoarchaeology* 12:2 (2020): 95.



Figure 32: Visitors fill up the Rotunda for Good Friday evening liturgical services (2019).



Figure 33: Priests carry the table with the *Epitaphios* and *kouvouklion* as well as the wooden cross out of the building, with a crowd following suit (2019).

the same ritual at St. George's church, located right next door to the Rotunda. People chanted and neighboring bells tolled—though none rang from the Rotunda, which has no bell tower. Eventually the objects and some of the crowd returned inside, and so ended Good Friday service. No religious services were held in the Rotunda to celebrate Easter Sunday. The site had returned to its monument function.

How did the Rotunda effectively become a religious place for one day before returning to its secular, monument status? How can such a meaningful identity be temporarily introduced into a space? Scholarship on the geography of religion is helpful for understanding this complex dynamic. Caitlin Finlayson's work, for instance, considers the ways in which non-traditional settings—like a jazzercise studio or a movie theatre—have been rendered, at least temporarily, into sacred places. In these “church[es]-in-a-box,” “sacredness might not only need to be created and recreated, but the sacred quality of the site might be decidedly transient, lasting until the service is over.”¹⁷ Finlayson's interviewees indicate that it is not the location itself that renders the space sacred, but rather the feelings of collective emotional connection with other church members. In other words, personal experience, emotions, and the intent of the people attending service were all important components of making the location sacred. Indeed, Finlayson argues that emotion and sacralization are mutually constitutive: “As a site is experienced as sacred, it is made sacred, and in this process of sacralization, its affective

¹⁷ Caitlin Finlayson, “Church-in-a-Box: Making Space Sacred in a Non-Traditional Setting,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 34:3 (2017): 304.

capacity to contribute to feelings of sacralization is heightened.”¹⁸ When a site is more permanent—when it is dedicated to activities put on by a religious community—the sense of sacredness becomes more long-lasting. Members do not have to put in the same effort to sacralize the space.¹⁹

When the Rotunda is occasionally transformed into a church, it is temporarily rendered into a different type of place. In Chapter 3, I argued that the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, as heritage sites, are in effect sacred secular places. Their sacredness remains, despite their monument and museum status, but this quality is reframed along secular lines. Here, when the Rotunda is used for liturgical services, its sacredness is temporarily reframed along religious lines. The space is remade into a religious place through the performance of rituals, use of objects, and gathering of community members, all of which, I argue, arouse feelings of collective emotional connection amongst the Rotunda’s visitors. The site’s religiosity becomes undone at the end of the day, when rituals are discontinued, objects are removed, and community members leave until the next liturgical event. The Rotunda’s religious sacred nature is thus made and remade through its visitors.

Given the Rotunda’s limited use as a church, and given the availability of other nearby churches for ecclesiastical services, why would individuals choose to go to the Rotunda for liturgy? According to Parallaxi Magazine, those who choose the Rotunda for Good Friday service “have a unique experience of immersion and grandeur” (έχουν μια

¹⁸ Finlayson, “Church-in-a-Box,” 306.

¹⁹ Finlayson, “Church-in-a-Box,” 316.

μοναδική εμπειρία κατάνυξης και μεγαλείου).²⁰ The priest is able to perform liturgical services without a microphone because of the Rotunda’s “riveting” (καθηλωτικό) acoustics.²¹ The mosaics are certainly a star attraction of the space, something I noticed during my visit. People who performed Good Friday rituals inside the Rotunda often spent some time afterwards admiring and photographing the building’s mosaics. Thus, some of the features that make the Rotunda an important piece of Thessaloniki’s heritage—its unique architecture and artwork—are the features that also invite religious visitors to the site. The Rotunda’s secular monument status is not a barrier to its religiosity.

Hagia Sophia and Istanbul

On 24 July 2020, two weeks after the Council of State annulled the 1934 cabinet decree that had converted Hagia Sophia into a museum, President Erdoğan opened *Ayasofya-i Kebir Cami-i Şerifi*, or Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque, to worship. This date was significant: It commemorated the anniversary of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which had determined Turkey’s modern borders and had been the impetus for the Greek-Turkish population exchange (Chapter 2). Though the treaty had historically been understood by many Turks as a victory, Erdoğan had recently begun portraying it as having robbed the nation of its rightful status as a great political power.²² By reopening

²⁰ “Η εμπειρία του Επιτάφιου στη Ποτόντα,” *Parallaxi*, 6 April 2018. [Online](#). Greek text between quotation marks have been copied verbatim from the source text.

²¹ “Η εμπειρία του Επιτάφιου στη Ποτόντα.”

²² Marc Champion and Constantine Courcoulas, “Erdoğan Asserts Rebirth of an Islamic Turkey at Hagia Sophia,” *Financial Post*, 11 July 2020. [Online](#).

Hagia Sophia on its anniversary, Erdoğan may have intended to undermine its influence, by projecting himself as in control of Turkey's national autonomy.

In the weeks prior to the grand reopening, statements circulated that the event would take place on 15 July 2020. This date would have commemorated the fourth anniversary of the failed coup d'état against Erdoğan and the state in 2016.²³ This event—which now figures importantly in Turkey's political heritage—was carried out by a faction of the Turkish Armed Forces, but failed after forces loyal to the government defeated them.²⁴ The reopening of Hagia Sophia on the coup's anniversary would certainly have made a strong statement about Erdoğan and his party's control of Turkey. In the end, the change of date to 24 July may have simply been a matter of logistics. The Council of State discussed the case on 2 July but did not release its decision until 10 July, and thus its ruling may not have allowed enough time for the government to organize the reopening event for 15 July. Regardless, Erdoğan was intent on making Hagia Sophia Mosque's reopening date a symbolic one.

²³ Bethan McKernan, "Hagia Sophia: The Mosque-Turned-Museum at the Heart of an Ideological Battle," *The Guardian*, 30 June 2020. [Online](#). The motivations for this coup included the decline in secularism in Turkey, a disregard for human rights, and the erosion of democracy. See, for instance: Drew Holland Kinney, "Civilian Actors in the Turkish Military Drama of July 2016," *Eastern Mediterranean Policy Note* 10 (19 September 2016). [Online](#).

²⁴ During my July 2021 visit to Istanbul, there were exhibitions and monuments across the city that commemorated those who died at the hands of the nation's "traitors," portraying the former as martyrs and veterans. For instance, the "Our Homeland, July 15 Martyrs Exhibition," with the motto "Turkey is Impassable," was temporarily on display on the Galata Bridge. Its collection of blown-up photographs of the coup d'état was used as proof for how "the dignity of patriotism defeated the invasion attempt overnight with immense pressure." It portrayed "our nation" as having protected the bodies of its citizens.

Similarly, the July 15 Sarachane Monument (or Sarachane 15 Temmuz Anıtı), includes an information panel rich in religious and national imagery: "Our heroes who had nothing but their faith and love for the country, were armed with ablution" and "Remaining grateful to our people, and indebted to our martyrs and veterans."

Thousands of visitors, a number of whom had travelled across Turkey for the occasion, took part in the Friday prayers of 24 July, with some even camping near the site the night before. Four *muezzins* recited the *adhān* from each of Hagia Sophia's minarets. Erdoğan, along with hundreds of dignitaries, joined the prayers inside the building. For security and COVID-19 safety precautions, about a thousand worshippers were permitted to join them indoors, while others set up prayer mats outside the site, on the grass or pavement. The prayer service and proceedings were relayed to outside worshippers through a big projection screen. Many attending expressed their excitement; one middle-aged woman commented: "We have been waiting for this moment since our childhood."²⁵ Significantly, the prayer was led by Ali Erbaş, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), the department responsible for supervising mosque personnel and enforcing laws on religious practice and worship. In a symbolic and performative gesture, Erbaş held a sword in his hand, an Ottoman-era signal of conquest. Two green flags, also symbolic of conquest, were positioned on the minbar (the pulpit from which the imam leads prayers). The general energy in Istanbul and at Hagia Sophia was in stark contrast with events that occurred outside of Turkey, especially in Greece, where 24 July became a day of mourning, with flags placed at half-staff and bells tolling in hundreds of churches across the country.²⁶

²⁵ Quoted in Neyran Elden, "Hagia Sophia: Former Istanbul Museum Welcomes Muslim Worshippers," *BBC News*, 24 July 2020. [Online](#).

²⁶ "Istanbul's Hagia Sophia Reopens as a Mosque for First Time in 86 Years," *France24*, 24 July 2020. [Online](#).

In July 2021, I visited Hagia Sophia multiple times a day to observe how the mosque was used and accessed by visitors. This period overlapped with Eid al-Adha,²⁷ the one-year anniversary of when Hagia Sophia officially reopened as a mosque, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. I was therefore able to observe Hagia Sophia during an especially busy time of the year (Eid) as well as during a less busy period (post-Eid), but also at a time that is perhaps not representative of how Hagia Sophia will typically operate (i.e., during a worldwide pandemic). However, as I explain in the ensuing narrative, it did not seem my experience of the site was overly determined by pandemic-related restrictions. While two future differences will presumably be the removal of the mask requirement and greater numbers of visitors, the actual use and access of the site seems less likely to change dramatically.

Entry to the mosque is gained from the same southwestern side as when it functioned as a museum, though now the entrance lies slightly further to the south. Attendants monitor the incoming visitors, and at different points of the day, they block off entrance to the site with retractable barriers. The reasons for doing so are not immediately clear. At times they inform the crowd that Hagia Sophia is closed for prayer time, but then they make a gap in the entrance barriers a mere few minutes later, before the prayer has even begun, thus allowing the crowd to rush into the building. At other times, the entrance is blocked off outside of the five official daily prayer times.

²⁷ Also known as the Feast of the Sacrifice, this celebration marks the final day of Hajj, the annual Muslim holy pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It should not be confused with Eid al-Fitr, also known as the Festival of Breaking the Fast, which is celebrated at the end of Ramadan, a month-long event where Muslims fast from dawn to dusk.

Past the entry gate, the ticket booths from Hagia Sophia's museum era are now nonoperational (Figure 34). Instead, visitors can pass directly into the courtyard. On a column to the right of the entry, there is a green plaque that identifies the site as "The Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque" (Figure 35); indeed, green is a recurring color at the site due to its numerous traditional associations in Islam.²⁸ Entering the courtyard, visitors can use the formerly blocked-off water fountain for ablution (the act of washing oneself in preparation for prayer) (Figure 36). Many visitors use the courtyard as an opportunity to photograph Hagia Sophia from the outside as well as an area to sit and relax. Once they approach the only public entrance into the building, attendants monitor them for clothing appropriateness. Unlike the neighboring Sultan Ahmed Mosque (also known as the Blue Mosque), where there are clear signs in the courtyard and the building's entrance that indicate what clothes must or may not be worn inside the mosque, there are no such signs at Hagia Sophia (Figure 37). Female visitors without a head veil or visitors with uncovered legs are directed to the former ticket booth area, where there is now a vending machine that sells the necessary attire (Figure 38).²⁹ Disposable head coverings are sold for 5 lira (approximately 0.60 USD) and gowns for 20 liras (approximately 2.40 USD). This is unlike the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, or other mosques in Istanbul, where these items can be borrowed free of charge and must be returned at the end of one's visit. This economic aspect of Hagia Sophia makes it feel a bit more like a museum space, somewhat akin to when visitors pay for audio guides.

²⁸ Green symbolizes the color of Islam. In Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 54–55.

²⁹ Generally, the exposure of the knee and below seemed acceptable at Hagia Sophia, whereas other mosques in Istanbul sometimes require full leg coverage.



Figure 34: The ticket booths at Hagia Sophia Mosque, remnants of the site's museum era, are now nonoperational (2021).



Figure 35: A plaque identifies the site as “The Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque” (2021).



Figure 36: Visitors at Hagia Sophia can now use the formerly blocked-off water fountain for ablution (2021).



Figure 37: Signs outside the Sultan Ahmed Mosque indicate appropriate clothing for entry (2021).



Figure 38: A vending machine at Hagia Sophia sells disposable head coverings and gowns (2021).



Figure 39: A rolled-up drape on a pulley system is located at the top of the tympanum, used to veil the mosaic in Hagia Sophia's vestibule (2021).

Once visitors gain access to the southwestern vestibule of Hagia Sophia, they are welcomed by a remnant of the site's former church function, a mosaic of the Virgin Mary with Christ.³⁰ The mosaic sits over the doorway to the narthex (the area at the western entrance of Christian churches), and there is a rolled-up drape on a pulley system at the top of the tympanum (the semi-circular decorative wall surface where the mosaic is located) (Figure 39). This design allows the mosaic to be covered up temporarily. When announcing Hagia Sophia's conversion, President Erdoğan had promised to only veil the building's mosaics during prayer times; otherwise, he claimed, the mosaics could be enjoyed by visitors, just as they were when the site functioned as a museum. During my numerous visits to Hagia Sophia, this southwestern mosaic was never covered up, even during prayer times—with the notable exception of the Friday noontime prayer, called *jum 'ah*, the most important and busiest one in Islam. During the *jum 'ah*, praying visitors fill up the mosque space, including the vestibule, which is why, according to locals I spoke with, the mosaic is covered at this time.

Once visitors make their way through the vestibule, they enter the narthex. This space has undergone significant changes since Hagia Sophia's conversion from a museum. Depending on the time of day, there are sometimes attendants in this area, who block off entry with retractable barriers or monitor for clothing appropriateness.³¹ The area closest to the stairs leading into the nave—the main area of the mosque—is now covered in green carpet. On the carpet are signs indicating that no footwear is permitted

³⁰ Muslim visitors, however, are likely familiar with this figure, given Mary's importance in Islam. See: Aliah Schleifer, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam* (Louisville, Ky.: Fons Vitae, 2008).

³¹ The location of site attendants at Hagia Sophia Mosque varied from visit to visit. Sometimes they were located by the courtyard doors, and at other times they were located in the narthex of the building.

inside the inner part of the building. Along the walls leading into the building are rows of shelves serving as shoe racks, where visitors may leave their footwear. These shelves are also found on the inside of the mosque, a testimony to the thousands of visitors who can fit inside the vast Hagia Sophia (Figure 40).³²

Though there are several doorways from the narthex into the mosque, typically only two are open. The first is the central door, known as the Imperial Door, which functions as the main entry point into the building. This area tends to be monitored by attendants. The second is the furthest door from the vestibule, to the northwest of the building, which leads into the women's prayer area. This area is not monitored. Above the Imperial Door is another mosaic, this one depicting Christ enthroned and Emperor Leo VI prostrating himself at his feet. As with the southwestern vestibule mosaic, there is a drape on a pulley system (Figure 41). In this case, however, the material sits below the mosaic, unused and clumsily rolled up. The wires used for the system are placed in front of the mosaic, a slight optical distraction from viewing and photographing the artwork. Like the previous one, it too is only covered during the Friday *jum'ah*.

Upon entering the mosque, visitors are met by an abundance of green. The marble floors of Hagia Sophia Museum have been entirely covered by green carpet—save one area in the southeast quarter of the nave, which is blocked off by red rope. This section of the floor is known as the *Omphalion*, or “navel of the earth,” and it decorated with thirty-two circles of various sizes (Figure 42). In Hagia Sophia's previous iteration as a mosque (1453–1934), this area had been covered by carpet. The fact that it is not today suggests

³² Hagia Sophia may have a worshipper capacity of up to 18,000. In Can Erözden and Ali Murat Alhas, “New Istanbul Mosque Becomes Largest in Turkey,” *Anadolu Agency*, 3 May 2019. [Online](#).



Figure 40: Shelves for shoes are now located throughout Hagia Sophia (2021).

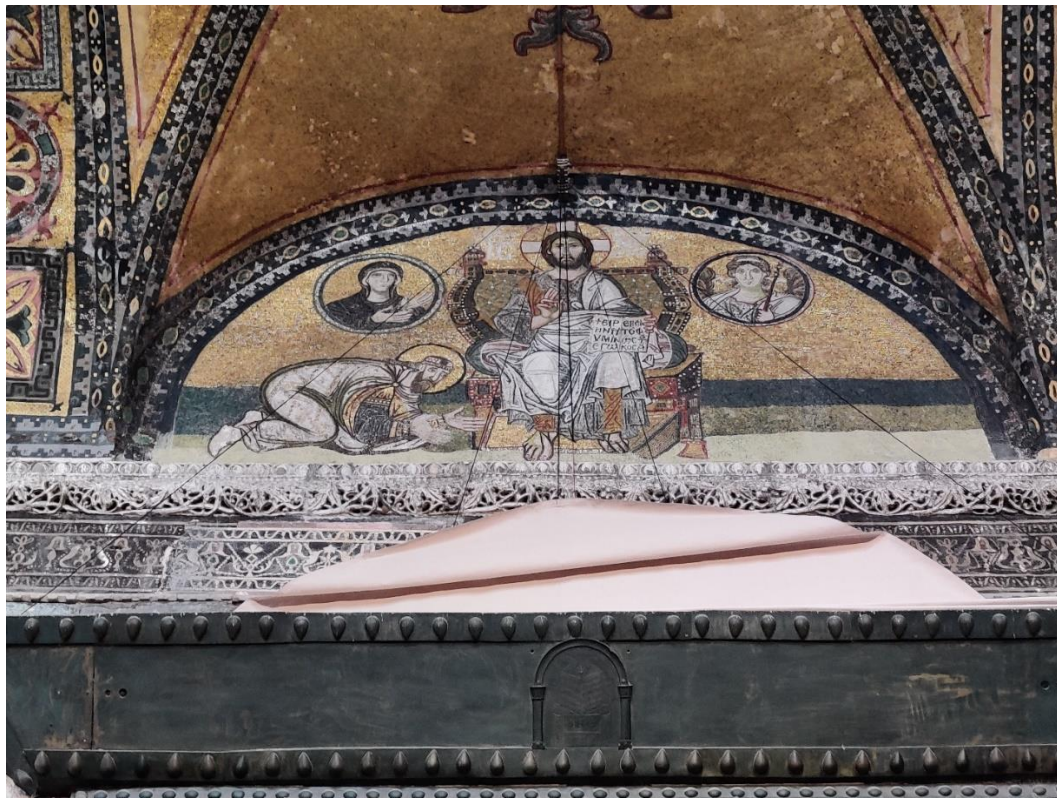


Figure 41: A drape on a pulley system sits clumsily below the Imperial Door mosaic in Hagia Sophia (2021).



Figure 42: The *Omphalion*, or “navel of the earth,” remains exposed inside Hagia Sophia (2021).

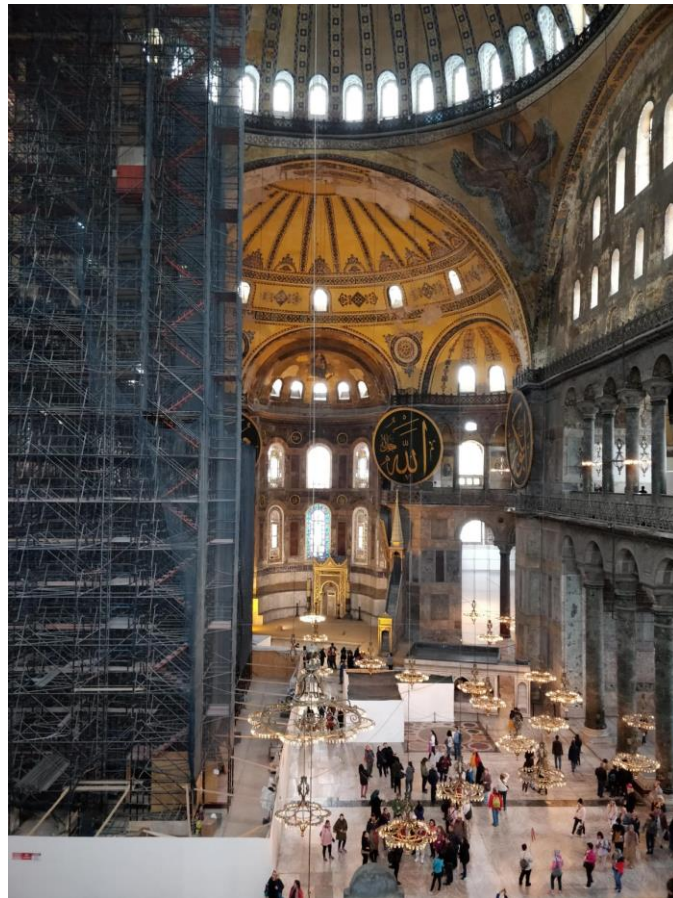


Figure 43: Scaffolding previously blocked off large sections of Hagia Sophia (2019).

that the site still functions as a museum in some respects, in that it highlights a piece of Byzantine heritage.

The nave of Hagia Sophia feels less encumbered than it did in my previous visits in 2009, 2018, and 2019. All the scaffolding that previously blocked off sections of the main floor has been entirely removed—however, it is unclear whether the conservation projects that had long visually marred the site were finally completed, or whether they were cut short (Figure 43).³³ The nave is now almost fully accessible, both visually and physically. It is a massive, very photogenic space, something not lost on visitors, many of whom take copious pictures and videos. Perhaps because of the contrast with the green, the low-hanging chandeliers are especially visible and illuminate the space with a slight golden hue. Because the mosque is always open, visitors can experience the different performances of light in the space, something that was impossible when Hagia Sophia was a museum.³⁴

Hagia Sophia is an energetic space, at least during daytime hours. Large numbers of people visit the site, praying, taking photographs, and some chatting or even video calling friends or family on their cellphones to show them the interior of the site. Children run around, playing tag or a variety of other games, unconcerned about tripping, the carpeted floor softening any tumbles. During my frequent visits to the site during this time, it was never a quiet, solemn religious space. There was always a cacophony of

³³ When Hagia Sophia was reopened as a mosque in July 2020, the scaffolding was still present in the mosque, but it was covered up with red sheets adorned with Islamic writings.

³⁴ Bissera Pentcheva reveals that the performance of glittering light in Hagia Sophia is focused on sunrise and sunset, times at which Hagia Sophia Museum would have been closed. In a paper presented at “Hagia Sophia: Perspectives from Cultural Heritage,” IES of Einaudi Center for International Studies at Cornell University, 19 September 2020. Online.

voices, in a plethora of different languages, filling the mosque. Even during the official prayer times, as the imam's loud voice was projected from a sound system throughout the space, children continued to play, screaming and laughing. These types of activities, in tandem with the call to prayer projected from the site's minarets, have substantially transformed the soundscape of the former Hagia Sophia Museum.

Hagia Sophia's central apse (a semicircular recess with a domed roof) has undergone some important changes in the building's conversion into a mosque. The most notable one—at least to visitors interested in the site's Christian history and imagery—is the veiling of its mosaics, both in the semidome and in the bema vault. The mosaic in the semidome is a ninth-century production that depicts the Virgin Mary enthroned, with the Christ Child seated in her lap. The bema vault mosaics depict two large archangels, Gabriel and Michael (though the latter mosaic is mostly destroyed). Today, these mosaics are obstructed by three sets of two side-by-side drapes in an elongated triangular shape, even during non-prayer times (Figure 44). Thus, despite the initial promise of only covering Hagia Sophia's mosaics during prayer time, there is an inconsistency in how this rule is applied. The mosaics in the external parts of the mosque are rarely covered, whereas those in the interior are always veiled. Perhaps this discrepancy is a reflection of how Hagia Sophia is used today. Even outside the five daily prayer times, many visitors can be found praying in various areas inside the building. Permanently veiling the mosaics in the apse may be a measure to prevent the sight of icons during such prayers.³⁵ On the other hand, it may be logistically easier to keep the mosaics in the vestibule and narthex unveiled—allowing visitors to enjoy at least some of Hagia Sophia's ancient

³⁵ See Chapter 4 for a discussion on the auratic power of religious objects.

mosaics—and only cover them during those times when the building is so full that these areas become filled with praying visitors (that is, during the Friday noontime prayer).

Two areas have been carved out for special use in Hagia Sophia Mosque: the men's area and the women's area. The men's area is in the apse of the building, blocked off by retractable barriers (Figure 45). Next to the opening, a sign reads "Men's Section" (in Turkish, English, and Arabic), and an attendant monitors that only men and children (boys and girls are both permitted) enter into the space. In this area are the mihrab and the minbar, architectural features from the Ottoman use of the site. The women's area, identified by signs reading "Ladies section," is in the northwestern aisle of Hagia Sophia. It is blocked by tall wood barriers, and can be accessed from two entry points: a door in the narthex and an opening in the barrier from the main section of the mosque (Figure 46). As mentioned previously, there is no attendant monitoring this section, though the much more visible barrier of the women's area may visually indicate to visitors that this space is restricted in some way.

The performance of the daily prayers in Hagia Sophia is certainly one of the most important and noticeable changes in how the site is used today. The call to prayer is projected outwards from Hagia Sophia's minarets, echoing the sounds from the other nearby minarets, filling the urban landscape of Istanbul with men's voices calling on Muslims to pray. Depending on the time of day, the retractable barriers are sometimes moved to expand the men's section, in order to accommodate the larger number of praying visitors. During one of my visits, the entire nave was blocked off for prayer, with attendants monitoring the Imperial Door that gives access to the section. The expansion



Figure 44: Elongated triangular-shaped curtains block Hagia Sophia's apse mosaics, even outside of prayer times (2021).

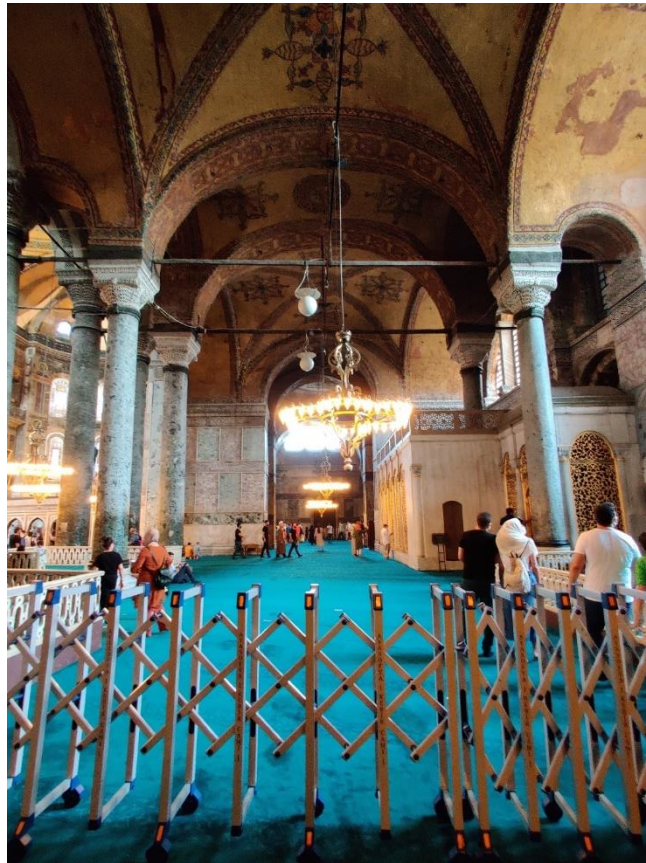


Figure 45: Retractable barriers, moved at various points of the day, demarcate men's and women's prayer spaces in Hagia Sophia (2021).

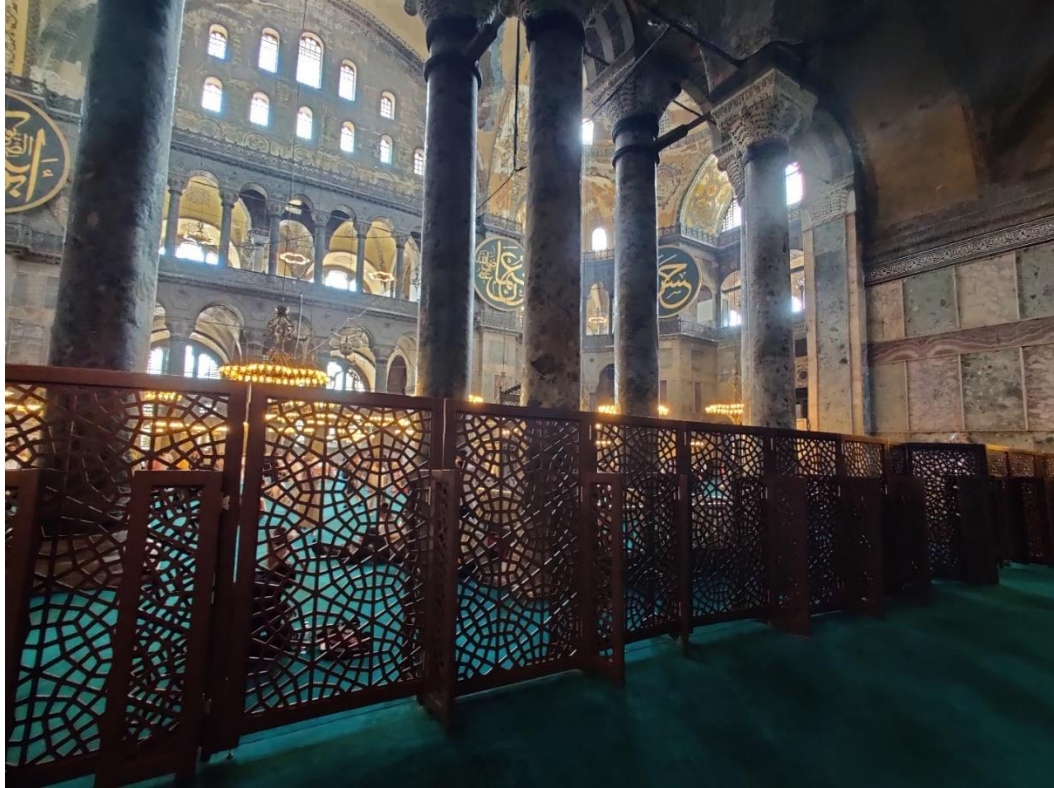


Figure 46: A wooden barrier blocks off the women's area inside Hagia Sophia (2021).

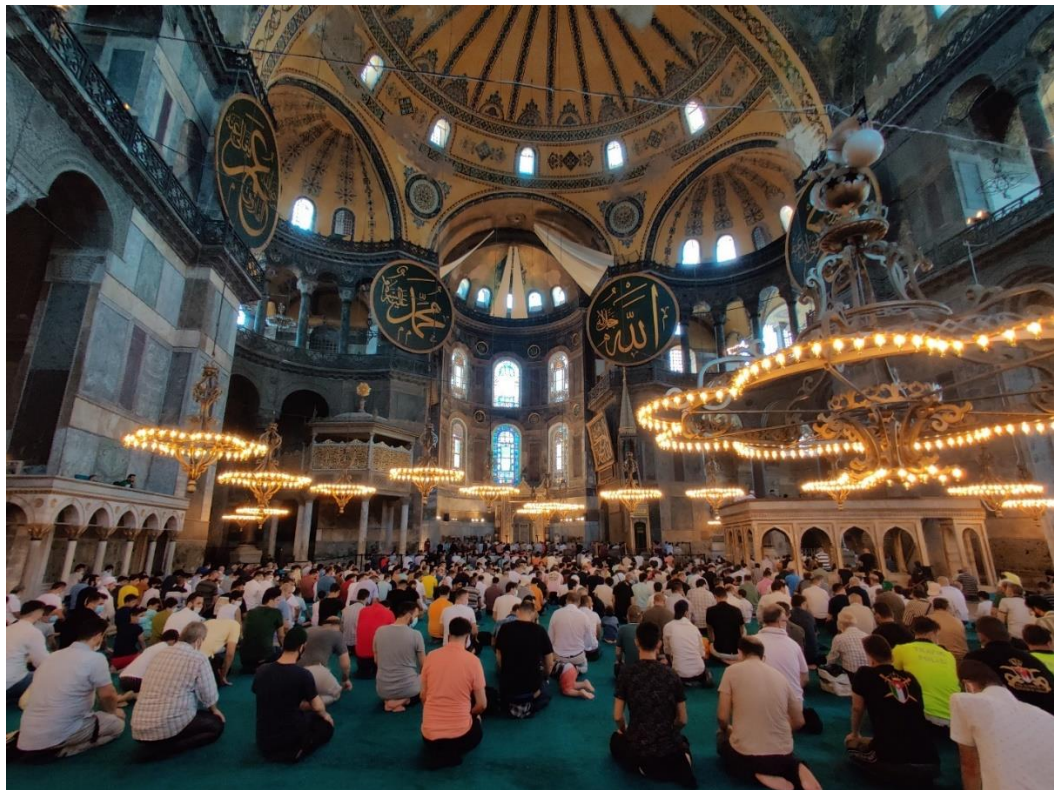


Figure 47: Religious rituals invoke a communal power largely absent from Hagia Sophia Museum (2021).

and contraction of the men's prayer area reflects the ebb and flow of visitors to Hagia Sophia at different times of the day and on different days of the week.

Prayers in Hagia Sophia are performed as they would be in other mosques. There are the ritualized movements, where worshippers enter the state of prayer by raising their hands to their ears or shoulders. Worshippers prostrate, stand, sit, and recite prayers at specific times, following readings of the Quran by the imam, and each movement is always preceded by the phrase "God is Great" (*allāhu 'akbar*). Bodies moving together, in tandem with religious verses, invoke a communal feeling and a powerful energy largely absent from the former Hagia Sophia Museum (Figure 47). After the prayer, many leave the area, but some stay in order to listen to the imam's post-prayer lecture. Once this part is over, the men's section empties out, save a few worshippers who approach the imam. The retractable barriers that blocked the expanded men's prayer area are then moved to the side aisles. Each prayer time, from the moment the men's area is closed off to non-worshippers and then reopened after the imam's lecture, takes approximately thirty to forty minutes.

Perhaps because non-worshipping visitors remain inside Hagia Sophia during prayer times, the area outside the men's section is busy with visitors photographing and filming the building and the rituals taking place within it.³⁶ Thus, Hagia Sophia Mosque, especially in such moments, becomes a liminal space in which religion, performance, exhibition, and education coexist. The same is true, but to a lesser degree, with the

³⁶ My experience at Hagia Sophia Mosque is that site access during prayer times was not restricted between worshipping and non-worshipping visitors. However, the Muze Istanbul website (a guide to Istanbul's museums and archaeological sites) discourages non-Muslim visitors from entering Hagia Sophia during these prayers: "Avoid visiting Hagia Sophia Mosque at prayer times (five times a day), especially noon praying on Fridays." Online: <https://muze.gen.tr/muze-detay/ayasofya>. This statement seems more a suggestion than a rule, as my site visits reveal.

women's section. Here, however, rather than a neat separation between those praying and those outside the area, there is significant intermixing, with some women praying, some on their phones, and some tending to their children. Non-Muslim and/or non-praying visitors walk among those praying, in some ways participating in a more immersive experience than that found in the men's area. The unmonitored women's section may be more conducive to this type of dynamic.

Vestiges of Hagia Sophia Museum remain throughout the site. The concession stands and souvenir shops next to the site's exit now sit empty and unused. Signs provide some historical background to the site or translate Islamic calligraphy for visitors. A column located in what is now the women's section, known as the "wishing column" or "perspiring column," is barricaded (Figure 48). Previously, visitors would make a wish and insert and rotate their thumb in a circle in the column's "healing hole." Legend has it that if the individual's thumb gets wet, it means their wish will be fulfilled. A barrier now restricts this "tourist" ritual at the mosque, perhaps because it would detract from Hagia Sophia's function as a mosque.

In my experience, visitors' access to and experience of Hagia Sophia is meaningfully different from that of the other significant mosques in Istanbul. In the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, for instance, the men's section is delineated with a sign that reads "Visitors stay behind this line / Thank you"³⁷ (Figure 49). At Hagia Sophia, there is no sign that targets non-Muslim visitors in the same way. Based on my site observations, it seems that praying and non-praying, Muslim and non-Muslim men access the men's area

³⁷ In the Camlica Mosque, a wooden barrier blocks the men's section and a sign reads "It is not appropriate for ladie's [sic] to enter this area."



Figure 48: A barrier blocks the “wishing column” or “perspiring column,” a popular feature of the former Hagia Sophia Museum (2021).



Figure 49: A sign at Sultan Ahmed Mosque indicates that the men’s section is closed to visitors (i.e., non-Muslims). A digital clock indicates the times for the five daily prayers (2021).

during non-prayer times. In fact, I also observed several women—especially at the end of prayer times, when lots of people enter and exit the men’s section—sneak into the men’s section to get a few pictures from inside the apse. Thus, it seems the division of space between “visitors” and “non-visitors” (that is, Muslims and non-Muslims), and even between women and men, is not strictly maintained or adhered to at Hagia Sophia Mosque.

As a woman, I could enter the women’s section of Hagia Sophia Mosque, which makes up a decently sized area of the building. Men do not have visual access to the area, nor are they permitted to physically enter it—unless they are staff members.³⁸ This is in contrast to women who, though they may not physically enter the men’s section of the mosque, can access it visually. Therefore, while men have access to the more important areas of the mosque, women get more visual access to the building. In some of the other mosques in Istanbul, there is a stricter division of sex, where women can only enter the building through an entirely separate entrance. That is the case with the newly-built Camlica Mosque, where the restricted women’s section is located in the upper gallery of the building.³⁹ However, many other mosques in the city do not operate in this way, such as the Sultan Ahmed Mosque or the Suleymaniye Mosque.

There are some other elements that differentiate Hagia Sophia from Istanbul’s other major mosques. For instance, these other sites either have an electronic clock

³⁸ For instance, I observed male attendants vacuum the carpet in this area during less busy times of the day.

³⁹ Opened in 2019, the mosque was built on a tall hill on the Asian side of Istanbul and can hold up to 63,000 people. Together, the reconverted Hagia Sophia Mosque and the newly built Taksim Mosque and Camlica Mosque are three major landmarks inaugurated by Erdoğan in Istanbul. His tenure has significantly transformed the urban landscape, transforming Istanbul into a more visibly and symbolically Islamist and neo-Ottoman city.

system or white board that posts the times for the day's prayers. In Hagia Sophia, however, there is no clock or board; praying visitors must already know this information or look it up on their phones. This absence of the prayer time schedule may reflect the "new" status of Hagia Sophia—it only became a mosque one year prior to my visits and so it may still undergo further changes in its transformation into a place of worship. At other mosques in Istanbul, these signs with prayer times also fulfill the function of indicating to non-worshipping visitors what times they are not permitted inside the building. At Hagia Sophia, this purpose seems less crucial, at least for the time being.

Furthermore, there is no place set aside in Hagia Sophia that offers literature about Islam to visitors. In some of the other major mosques in Istanbul, such as the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, there are bookshelves with a variety of pamphlets and small books that address various topics pertaining to Islam, Muslim identity, and the existence of God. These materials are available in a variety of languages and are free to take. Perhaps this set-up does not currently exist in Hagia Sophia because visitors can learn more about the mosque and Islam in the Cultural Center a few meters outside the site's exit. Visitors receive tea and baklava, as they watch a PowerPoint presentation of Hagia Sophia's history and some of the basic elements of Islam. Through the hospitality of the center's volunteers, who are typically students of theology, and their ask-any-question attitude, Islam is presented as an apolitical, welcoming religion, in turn, projecting Turkey as a tolerant, hospitable nation.

The center has some striking resemblances to the programming at the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Centre for Cultural Understanding, a non-for-profit organization established in the United Arab Emirates in 1998, and which I visited in

March 2018. This center in Dubai, which operates under the banner “Open doors. Open minds,” invites tourists and expatriates to participate in customs and practices presented as traditionally Emirati. It hosts “cultural meals,” which are highly curated experiences, in which visitors are welcomed to a communal meal and given a brief introduction to Emirati culture and history. It aims to provide a moderate version of Islam to visitors, in part to correct any misconception of extremism or terrorism that may be associated with the Middle East.⁴⁰ Visitors are assured that no questions are off limits in these conversations. More importantly, the center aims to construct the UAE as a tolerant nation, an image dissonant with the nation’s heritage-building efforts that marginalize non-Emirati communities.⁴¹ In a similar vein, the Cultural Center at Hagia Sophia Mosque’s exit, through its projection of Islam as apolitical and Turkey as hospitable, may distract visitors from the nation’s counternarratives, in which minority cultural and religious groups experience intolerance.⁴² These two examples once again reflect the

⁴⁰ Al Serkal states: “We can’t stop stereotypes or negative news that shape the Arab world to the West, but we have the practical answer alive right here in a country with a majority of non-Arab and non-Muslim population. They are our messengers who will respond to the negative light shed on the region and demonstrate that it’s an area of tolerance and positivity.” Quoted in Sherouk Zakaria, “Expatriates Here are Messengers of Peace,” *Khajeel Times Dubai*, 16 November 2017. [Online](#).

⁴¹ Approximately 90% of the UAE’s 9 million residents are foreign nationals, predominantly from India and Pakistan. Migrant workers, however, are in a particularly vulnerable position in Emirati society. They live in overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions, in labor camps separate from and basically hidden away from Emirati communities, and they have scarce legal protection. While the UAE may celebrate its cultural diversity, this diversity is strictly managed within the urban landscape. See: Mustafa Qadri, “The UAE’s Kafala System: Harmless or Human Trafficking?,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 July 2020. [Online](#).

⁴² The “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey,” produced by the U.S. Department of State’s Office of International Religious Freedom, paints a dark image of the country, highlighting the harsh restrictions placed on non-Muslims groups: “The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities, especially those not recognized under the government’s interpretation of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which includes only Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians.” In particular, the report states, “Religious minorities again reported difficulties opening or operating houses of worship; resolving land and property disputes and legal challenges of churches whose lands the government previously expropriated; holding governing board elections for their

political nature of religious heritage sites, which can be used to anchor hegemonic national narratives of the past *and* the present.

Finally, Hagia Sophia has undergone changes that reflect its role as one of Istanbul’s grand mosques. In May 2021, a traditional Ramadan banner known as a *mahya* was hung outside of the building. In dangling lights suspended between two minarets, it reads *La ilahe illallah (lā ilāha illā allāh* in Arabic), meaning “There is no God but Allah” (Figure 50). As a traditional Ottoman symbol, and much like the sword wielded by the head of *Diyanet* on the mosque’s reopening, or the green flags on the minbar, it is a visual reminder of Hagia Sophia’s former Ottoman identity. The Ramadan banners in Istanbul shine through the nighttime urban landscape, legible from afar, reminding residents and visitors of Istanbul’s religious, and perhaps neo-Ottoman, identity.



Figure 50: A traditional Ramadan banner, or *mahya*, is strung between Hagia Sophia’s minarets (2021).

religious foundations; and obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes in schools.” The report is available [online](#).

Post(-)secular Places?

When the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia were made into monuments and museums, important aspects of the sites were restricted, such as the use of sacred objects or the performance of ritualized actions by religious communities. These actions fundamentally changed what kind of places they were. Their conversion at the beginning of the early twentieth century was part of a larger urban makeover in which politicians negotiated and curbed the role of religion in the public forums of Thessaloniki and Istanbul. However, over time, a religious revival led to particular being demands made on heritage sites. The zeitgeist that had initially enabled nation-states to convert religious places into monuments and museums has evolved over the course of the last century into a desire, at least among some very vocal stakeholders, to make heritage religious once again. As this project has shown time and time again, the forces of continuity and discontinuity are often in tension in the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia's narratives.

Through a virtual tour, this chapter has shown the ways in which the once-secularized Rotunda and Hagia Sophia today function in religious ways. Can we speak of these two sites as *post-secular* places? The terms "post-secular" and "post-secularism" have a range of meanings. According to some scholars, the world today is undergoing a historical shift, in which it has become reenchanting (to adapt Marx Weber's famous phrase), having experienced a *resurgence* or *reemergence* of religious practices in the public forum.⁴³ Post-secularism has therefore been offered as a term to refer to the coexistence of the religious and the secular in some societies, driven by a desire for

⁴³ See, for instance: José Casanova, "Exploring the Postsecular: Three Meanings of 'the Secular' and Their Possible Transcendence," in *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 27–48.

peaceful dialogue and mutual understanding.⁴⁴ Other scholars, as I noted in the Part II Introduction, argue for the *persistence* of religion.⁴⁵ That is, this phenomenon never went away; rather, we were not looking in the right places for it. Amongst this group, some reject the concept of post-secularism altogether, as it risks “waving a magic wand over all the intricacies, contradictions, and problems of what counts as religion” and reducing them “to a single, bland category.”⁴⁶

In many ways, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia reflect all these varied understandings of post-secularism. The Rotunda confirms the coexistence of heritage and religious values and uses within the same site. The Greek government accommodates these different uses, balancing them by legally prescribing twelve secular and twelve religious events per year. Though this decision may intend to represent an equal standing between the two uses, the Rotunda nevertheless remains a museum the majority of the time, thus affirming its predominant secular character. Hagia Sophia confirms the persistence *and* resurgence of religion. The desire to see Hagia Sophia as a mosque again, as Chapter 4 revealed, never completely faded. Rather, proponents did not have a

⁴⁴ Philosopher Jürgen Habermas popularized the term “post-secularism.” He argued that the secularization of the state was an appropriate response to the religious wars of early modernity, but that it did not achieve mutual understanding. Rather, coexistence between the two spheres needed to be sought. He concludes: “So, if all is to go well both sides, each from its own viewpoint, must accept an interpretation of the relation between faith and knowledge that enables them to live together in a self-reflective manner.” In “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 29.

⁴⁵ Peter L. Berger uses the terms “desecularization” or “counter-secularization” to highlight the failure of the secularization theory and to explain the modern phenomenon of ongoing religion. He discusses, for instance, the upsurge of Islamic and Evangelic movements around the world, some of which are located in highly modernized cities; its adherents, in some cases, are secularized professionals. See: *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center / W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 1999); “Secularism in Retreat,” *The National Interest* 46 (1996): 3–12.

⁴⁶ Jayne Beckford, “Public Religion and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5:1 (2012): 17.

platform on which to express themselves. Once they did, under the charismatic President Erdoğan, their voices could be heard much more loudly. Simultaneously, the societal changes introduced by Erdoğan's government, such as increased Islamic schooling, produced a resurgence of religion within the state.⁴⁷ This became a self-reinforcing cycle. Heritage sites like the Hagia Sophias of Istanbul, Iznik, and Trabzon became intertwined with these larger societal trends.

Geographer Veronica della Dora draws an important distinction between the hyphenated post-secularism and the unhyphenated postsecularism. To do so, she first turns to the term “post-colonialism.” In her view, the hyphenated “post-” stresses the historical fact of colonialism, making it a *fait accompli*. In contrast, she writes, “The absence of the hyphen in ‘postcolonial’ suggests continuity with the present; it readdresses our attention to our contemporary world.”⁴⁸ In other words, it reorients the reader into a critical rather than historical mindset. A similar argument can be made about post-secularism and postsecularism. As Dora writes, “We can think of a hyphenated ‘post-secular’ as stressing rupture with a ‘secular’ past, and therefore referring to a historical phase that supersedes the secular, whether through a return of the religious in the public sphere or a resurgence of the spiritual in the private.”⁴⁹ However, given that scholars question the very category of secularism—its meaning, its reach, its temporal frame—it is difficult to determine a *post-secular* phase. The term postsecularism, on the

⁴⁷ See, for instance: Darren Butler, “With More Islamic Schooling, Erdogan Aims to Reshape Turkey,” *Reuters*, 25 January 2018. [Online](#).

⁴⁸ Veronica della Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies: Making, Unmaking and Remaking Sacred Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42:1 (2018): 47.

⁴⁹ Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies,” 47–48.

other hand, can serve as a “critique of the discursive, normative, and structural assumptions of secular ideology.”⁵⁰ It avoids assuming that a desecularized society exists. In this sense, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia could certainly be framed as *postsecular places*. The recent religious activity at these sites not only challenges the secularization theory but also suggests how heritage places can be an important milieu for religious revival.

Though secularization has been touted as a political tool for achieving tolerance and maintaining peace, I argue that this process has in some respects failed within the heritage sphere, as the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia demonstrate. Secularization has silenced stakeholders rather than changed mindsets. It has fostered dissonance rather than extinguishing it. I argue that there is an inherent dissonance to secularizing religious sites: How can we appreciate the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia for their religious identity and history but not permit their religious use? To do so is to relegate religion to the past, to celebrate it for its historical importance and to reject its value in the present. This consideration is precisely what makes religious heritage different from other forms of heritage. These sites’ recognition as heritage in the early twentieth-century circumscribed their use, and in turn, their religious character. However, given that religion is so deeply embedded in our social structures, we must find different paradigms for understanding the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, and religious heritage sites more broadly. Part III, which is oriented towards the future of heritage management, takes up this challenge.

⁵⁰ Olson et al., quoted in Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies,” 48.

Part III: The Future

Introduction

One of the motivations in writing this project is to address the gaps between critical heritage studies literature, public approaches to religious heritage preservation and management, and policy frameworks for religious heritage governance. There is a tendency among heritage scholars to be overly critical of site management, at times potentially inhibiting positive developments of the heritage sites.¹ Often, the literature is helpful in making clear what should *not* be done, but it offers few solutions as to what should or could be done. Public approaches to heritage management, on the other hand, at times deploy UNESCO World Heritage status as if it provides a clear-cut mandate for religion's restricted role at certain historic sites—as the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia have demonstrated.² But this application is deceptive; many World Heritage sites are active religious places. The gulf between literature and on-the-ground practice creates a pressing need for dynamic and practical guidelines that attend to dissonance over religious heritage, that addresses its particularities.³

¹ Višnja Kisić remarks how critical museology and critical heritage studies “at some point became criticism for the sake of criticism without intention or power to inform practice,” thus conveying a nothing-is-good-enough approach. This critical literature, Kisić argues, can build walls for practitioners in the field, where the academic community is placed “in a position of arbitrating the quality of professional conduct – all of which makes space for change quite limited.” In *Governing Heritage Dissonance: Promises and Realities of Selected Cultural Policies* (Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation, 2016), 20.

² For instance, with the news of Hagia Sophia's conversion into a mosque, UNESCO released a statement that was used in the media to bolster criticism of the site's new status. The statement declares that, “the effective, inclusive and equitable participation of communities and other stakeholders concerned by the property is necessary to preserve this heritage and highlight its uniqueness and significance” (“UNESCO Statement on Hagia Sophia, Istanbul,” *UNESCO*, 10 July 2020. [Online](#)). The statement suggests that other communities, namely Christians, no longer have equitable access to the site. On the other hand, it could also be argued that they did not have equitable access to the site when it was a museum.

³ Dissonant heritage refers to loci of inharmonious narratives and public representations of the past and therefore are also sites of contestation between different religious, political, and (inter)national groups today (Introduction).

In what follows, I identify some existing frameworks that address conflict and dissonance over heritage and I summarize some of UNESCO's approaches to religious and sacred heritage. Such frameworks, I conclude, do not acknowledge how religious heritage, as a subset of dissonant heritage, requires special attention and guidance. Aiming to address this gap, Part III will introduce a paradigm to better conceptualize the relationship between religious and secular identities and uses of heritage places. This paradigm can also help us rethink how to mediate dissonant religious heritage.

UNESCO

UNESCO—a specialized agency of the United Nations which focuses on international development and cooperation in the fields of education, science, and culture—is a preeminent heritage organization that aims at fostering inclusivity and peace-making among nations. The UNESCO name also has a broad currency in the tourism sector, especially vis-à-vis its World Heritage List. Created in the 1970s by the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, this ever-expanding list⁴ is committed to “the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the

⁴ As of July 2021, there is a total of 1,154 World Heritage sites distributed across 167 countries. The World Heritage Convention meets once a year, where they vote on a number of issues, including the listing of new World Heritage sites. In “World Heritage List Statistics,” *UNESCO*, n.d. [Online](#).

world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity.”⁵ World Heritage status has become a brand in the tourism sector and UNESCO’s “most sought-after label.”⁶

The establishment of UNESCO’s World Heritage List accomplished a number of things. The Convention articulates the need for state members (which today number 194 countries) to protect cultural and natural heritage from the threats of destruction and deterioration. It acknowledges the importance “of safeguarding this unique and irreplaceable property, to whatever people it may belong.” Therefore, the Convention states, “It is incumbent on the *international community as a whole* to participate in the protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, by the granting of *collective assistance*.”⁷ The Nubian Salvage Campaign of the 1960s and 1970s, which brought together dozens of nations to carry out rescue archaeological excavations and relocate twenty-three massive monuments from Egypt and Sudan, was

⁵ “World Heritage,” *UNESCO*, n.d. [Online](#). In 1978, UNESCO adopted the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, which demarcated the criteria for selection. Heritage sites must be nominated by the states in which they reside and meet at least one of the ten criteria. A cultural property, for instance, must “represent a *unique artistic or aesthetic* achievement, a masterpiece of the creative genius” (criterion [i]) or “be *unique, extremely rare, or of great antiquity*” (criterion [iii]). In UNESCO, “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention” (Paris, 1978). Emphasis in the original.

⁶ Lynn Meskell, *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 81. Though many scholars have been critical of UNESCO and this list, recent studies have suggested that the benefits of World Heritage status outweigh the negative aspects. Sally Farid, for instance, in her study of Mali and Zimbabwe, concludes that the number of World Heritage sites has a significant positive effect on international tourist arrivals. She writes that “a country possessing a [World Heritage site] is in a win-win situation not only for the sustainable conservation of cultural achievements and natural resources, but also for the development of the tourism industry.” In “Tourism in World Heritage Sites and its Impact on Economic Development: Some African Countries Case Studies,” in *Proceedings of the II International Conference on Best Practices in World Heritage: People and Communities* (Menorca, Spain: 2015), 735.

⁷ UNESCO, “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” (Paris, 1972). My emphasis.

one of UNESCO's first international projects that promoted this kind of collective intervention.

In line with UNESCO's *raison d'être*—it was established after World War II to build peace in the minds of men and women through culture, education, and science—the organization has demonstrated a particularly strong concern for militarized threat to heritage, such as the intentional or unintentional destruction of historic sites and landscapes resulting from wartime violence. Thus, in Article 11.4 of the Convention, the World Heritage Committee also established the *List of World Heritage in Danger*, identifying “the outbreak or the threat of an armed conflict” among one of the risks faced by cultural heritage. Over time, UNESCO and other international organizations have increasingly understood the destruction of heritage as not merely the collateral damage of war, but a target and essential goal of armed conflict.⁸ Architect Robert Devan argues this kind of destruction “has become a proxy by which other ideological, ethnic and nationalist battles are still being fought today” and is thus a prelude to cultural genocide.⁹

This argument has found increasing legal standing. In 2016, a historic judgment in the International Criminal Court found Malian jihadist Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi guilty of war crimes for his role in the 2012 destruction of ten religious sites in Timbuktu and gave him a nine-year prison sentence. Irina Bokova, then-Director General of UNESCO,

⁸ Lauso Zagato, “The Notion of ‘Heritage Community’ in the Council of Europe’s Faro Convention: Its Impact on the European Legal Framework,” in *Between Imagined Communities of Practice: Participation, Territory and the Making of Heritage*, ed. Nicolas Adell et al. (Göttingen: Göttingen University Press, 2015), 148–149.

⁹ Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, 2nd Ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 21.

explained UNESCO's role in the matter, stating, "Immediately after the destruction in 2012, UNESCO alerted the international community and seized the International Criminal Court to ensure such crimes do not go unpunished."¹⁰ This case demonstrates not only UNESCO's concern for heritage but also concrete actions to protect it legally.

However, scholars have argued that UNESCO's mission to prevent destruction and conflict has increasingly fallen short of its aim. Archaeologist Lynn Meskell, for instance, cites several examples of World Heritage sites that have recently been violent loci for contests over heritage, including: Preah Vihear, an ancient Khmer temple in Cambodia; the Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora, an archaeological site on the Black Sea; and the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls, a holy city for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.¹¹ In these instances, according to Meskell, UNESCO not only failed to achieve its peace-making goal *but also* contributed to the conflicts. She deems this the "the dark side of heritage branding," writing, "Through international recognition one version of history is not only recognized but enshrined, rendering UNESCO complicit in incorporating episodes of illegal occupation, atrocities, war crimes, and even

¹⁰ "Timbuktu Trial: 'A Major Step Towards Peace and Reconciliation in Mali'," *UNESCO*, 27 September 2016. [Online](#).

¹¹ When Preah Vihear received UNESCO World Heritage status in 2008, the inscription provoked border clashes between Cambodia (the nominating country) and Thailand, leading Thai soldiers to occupy the Ta Moan Temple complex and Cambodians to retaliate by taking over Ta Krabei Temple. Chersonesus, located in southwest Crimea and listed in 2013, has been a political tool for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has appropriated the World Heritage site as *Russian* heritage and used its history as a justification for Crimea's annexation to Russia. Meskell writes: "The fight for Crimea, Putin lectured a group of young historians, is the fight for Chersonesus; the site has a sacred significance, considered the initial font of Russia's baptism" (*A Future in Ruins*, 158). As for Jerusalem, which was inscribed to the World Heritage list in 1981, Meskell writes, "UNESCO has continually found itself in an impossible situation" over the especially volatile Israeli-Palestinian conflict (162).

genocide, while the victims are left to relive the trauma.”¹² Furthermore, while UNESCO appears primarily concerned with the destruction that results from *armed* conflict (as in the Al Mahdi case), many clashes over heritage are unrelated to wars or involve no or little physical violence. Conflicts over the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, and many other heritage sites, are *ideological*. In other words, UNESCO lacks clear guidance for *dissonant* heritage.

UNESCO has not overlooked religious heritage. The World Heritage Committee’s Advisory Bodies—IUCN, ICOMOS, and ICCROM¹³—have carried out a number of studies and analyses directed at religious and sacred heritage in particular. These documents include the IUCN Guidelines for the Conservation and Management of Sacred Natural Sites, the ICCROM 2003 Forum on “Living Religious Heritage: Conserving the Sacred,” and the ICOMOS 2005 General Assembly resolution calling for the establishment of an International Thematic Programme for Religious Heritage. Taken together, these documents establish a need for greater attention to and care for religious heritage, and IUCN provides useful guidelines for conflict management.¹⁴ However, they

¹² That is, such episodes of conflict and violence are waged “by cultural properties being nominated, inscribed, claimed, and counterclaimed through UNESCO’s instruments.” In Meskell, *A Future in Ruins*, 170.

¹³ The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is an international organization in the field of nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) is a non-governmental international organization dedicated to the conservation and protection of cultural heritage monuments and sites around the world. The International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) is an intergovernmental organization devoted to the preservation of cultural heritage worldwide and working in the service of its Member States.

¹⁴ For instance, the IUCN Guidelines for the Conservation and Management of Sacred Natural Sites promotes education as a means for assuaging conflict, arguing that, “In most cases, once visitors are aware of the behaviour expected of them, the great majority will respect the wishes of custodians by refraining from behaviours considered inappropriate or disrespectful to that particular sacred site.” However, it further acknowledges that “Controlling the persistent minority of people who do not respect custodians’ wishes

do little to acknowledge the complex, conflicting, overlapping relationship of secular, sacred, and religious understandings and valuations of heritage, as well as the resulting ideological dissonance these varied understandings may create.¹⁵ That is, dissonance can exist between different religious groups making claims to the same site and between groups who either make “secular” or “religious” claims to heritage sites. Thus, the categories of the religious, sacred, and secular—their use and their negotiation—are central to this dissonance. Dissonance over religious heritage thus requires particular frameworks and terminology for understanding what is at stake in these different uses and conceptualizations of religious heritage places.

UNESCO has expressed an interest in producing guiding principles for the protection of religious heritage.¹⁶ In 2010, the organization supported its first major international meeting on “heritage of religious interest” in Kyiv, Ukraine. It noted that World Heritage sites “require specific policies for protection and management that take into account their distinct spiritual nature as a key factor in their conservation,” and suggested that such policies “cannot be sustainable without in-depth consultation with the appropriate stakeholders.”¹⁷ At the close of the meeting, participants adopted the

remains an ongoing challenge.” In Robert Wild and Christopher McLeod (eds.), *Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers* (Gland, Switzerland: IUCN and Paris: UNESCO, 2008), 60.

¹⁵ As I noted in the project’s Introduction, I deploy the term “sacred” to refer to the quality, value, or nature of heritage as it constructed, inherited, and/or understood by people. Something sacred is set apart from the ordinary. I use the term “religious,” on the other hand, to refer to forms of heritage that are or were claimed by religious communities or institutions. I intentionally use the term religious in order to think about the use of and access to religious heritage sites.

¹⁶ UNESCO’s policy towards religious heritage lacks clear guidance and regulations, despite many listed sites being of a religious nature. Approximately 20% of World Heritage sites “have some sort of religious or spiritual connection.” In “Heritage of Religious Interest: UNESCO Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest,” *UNESCO*, n.d. [Online](#).

¹⁷ “Heritage of Religious Interest.”

*Statement on the Protection of Religious Properties within the Framework of the World Heritage Convention.*¹⁸ The statement gave recognition to the role of religious communities in creating, maintaining, and shaping religious places. It also acknowledged that the preservation of religious heritage “represents a special challenge and opportunity that needs to be addressed in the effective implementation of the World Heritage Convention” (Article 7). It identified a need for an action plan directed at the protection of religious heritage around the world, which would boost the role of communities and circumvent misunderstandings, frictions, and stereotypes.

Recently, UNESCO proposed the Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest, claiming that “the international community should define the appropriate measures to preserve the values of religious and sacred places, which form the foundation of our cultures.”¹⁹ In 2014, the ICOMOS Scientific Committee for Places of Religion and Ritual (PRERICO) was established to conduct research for this initiative.²⁰ These steps suggest that UNESCO is increasingly interested in building a more permanent, long-term strategy for addressing issues of religious heritage preservation, though this approach is still in its early stages.

¹⁸ “Heritage of Religious Interest.”

¹⁹ “Heritage of Religious Interest.” The project is yet to be started.

²⁰ The aim of PRERICO is to promote “the understanding, protection, conservation and management of places in their tangible and intangible aspects, which are valued as heritage for the present, past and future roles in religious and ritual contexts.” In “By-Laws for PRERICO,” *ICOMOS PRERICO*, 6 March 2017. [Online](#).

Faro Convention

In addition to UNESCO's contributions, other policy- or guidance-related materials address dissonant heritage. The 2005 Council of Europe Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, also known as the Faro Convention, is a case study for thinking about the intersection of dissonant heritage and the guiding frameworks produced to address it. This text, ratified by twenty member States of the Council of Europe and entered into force in 2011, declares that "knowledge and use of heritage form part of the citizen's right to participate in cultural life."²¹ In particular, it promotes the idea that heritage objects and places are important precisely because of "the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent."²² It therefore considers heritage from the viewpoint of contemporary stakeholders, giving space to local interpretations of heritage.

The Convention is one of the first of a very small set of framework documents acknowledging, firstly, that multiple meanings can be attached to heritage;²³ secondly, that these meanings can evolve over time;²⁴ and, thirdly, that there is thus potential for heritage conflict due to varying interpretations and assignment of meanings to the heritage under question.²⁵ It also understands dialogue around cultural heritage to be a

²¹ "Details of Treaty No. 199," *Council of Europe*, n.d. [Online](#).

²² "Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention, 2005)," *Council of Europe*, n.d. [Online](#).

²³ Section II, Article 7a promotes "respect for diversity of interpretations."

²⁴ Section I, Article 2a explains that "cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions."

²⁵ Section III, Article 12a acknowledges "the opportunities and challenges which the cultural heritage represents" and encourages public reflection and debate.

means of addressing conflict within society. Through public authorities and other bodies, the Member States pledged to “develop knowledge of cultural heritage as a resource to facilitate peaceful co-existence by promoting trust and mutual understanding with a view to resolution and prevention of conflicts” (Section II, Article 7c).

The Faro Convention provides a dynamic understanding of heritage, by acknowledging the multiple, evolving, and sometimes clashing meanings of heritage sites. It further proposes a dynamic approach to heritage management and preservation by encouraging mutual, respectful dialogue between stakeholder communities as a means for tempering dissonant heritage. However, the Faro Convention does not address religious heritage specifically, despite the (occasional) particular volatility of such heritage. As this project has sought to demonstrate, conflict and dissonance over religious heritage present unique challenges to the preservation and management of historic sites. For some stakeholders, the restricted access to religious heritage places can have significant communal, emotional, and spiritual consequences. Thus, special attention and guidance is needed to address dissonance over religious heritage.

Ultimately, Part III builds on these frameworks to reimagine future possibilities for religious heritage sites. UNESCO has done important work to raise awareness and to protect tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage and the Faro Convention has done further work to address dissonant heritage. As a specialist in religion, I approach these problems from new angles, building on prior foundations to focus on *religious* forms of dissonant heritage more specifically.²⁶ Part III aims to take up the charge given

²⁶ I consider the Faro Convention in its broader relevance and application. I am therefore not interested in its promotion of a “common heritage of Europe” or Pan-Europeanness. See: Simona Pinton, “The Faro Convention, the Legal European Environment and the Challenge of Commons in Cultural Heritage,” in

by UNESCO of defining “the appropriate measures to preserve the values of religious and sacred places,” by addressing the visitor sustainability challenges and opportunities presented by dissonant religious heritage. It does so by putting the Faro Convention in action, suggesting that a carefully negotiated balance of religious and secular uses and access of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, as well as heritage places more broadly—in contrast to the secularization of religious sites—has the potential to reconcile diverse identities.

Such places enable a more authentic experience of the past and present within the same space, making them sites worth preserving well into the future. In Chapter 6, I present hybrid ways of conceptualizing the relationship between religious and secular uses of heritage places, while in Chapter 7, I examine visitor sustainability at religious heritage sites. I do so by taking into account what UNESCO calls the “distinct spiritual nature”²⁷ of these sites while also addressing the preservation and conservation priorities of the heritage industry.

Cultural Heritage: Scenarios 2015–2017, ed. Simona Pinton and Lauso Zagato (Venice: Edizioni Cà Foscari, 2017), 317.

²⁷ “Heritage of Religious Interest.”

Chapter 6: New Geographies for Religious Heritage Places

“The building’s shifting allegiances over millennia have been assimilated into its architecture; the evocative physical traces of its lives as a church and a mosque suggest possible models for their continued co-presence.”¹

In response to Muslim religious activity that had taken place at Hagia Sophia Museum in 2016, the Hellenic Republic Ministry of Public Affairs made the following statement: “Obsessions, verging on bigotry, with Muslim rituals in a monument of world cultural heritage are incomprehensible and reveal a lack of respect for and connection with reality. Such actions are not compatible with modern, democratic and secular societies.”² Why, exactly, would the ministry see these actions as incompatible? Soon thereafter, when defending his decision to permanently transfer an ancient inauguration to the Rotunda in 2017, Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Anthimos contended that the Greek Ministry of Culture’s desire to safeguard the site does not mean it cannot be used or characterized as a religious building. Preservation and religious use, in his mind, were not mutually exclusive—why?

Though the Ministry of Culture and Metropolitan Anthimos came to opposite conclusions, their logic relied on the same assumption: that different uses produce different places. This position seems to align with much of public opinion, as well as scholarship on religious heritage places. As religion scholar Thomas S. Bremer writes, “The religious understandings of a site create one set of places, while touristic

¹ Ziad Jamaledine, “Hagia Sophia Past and Present,” *Places Journal*, August 2020. [Online](#).

² “Foreign Ministry Announcement Regarding the Scheduling by Turkish Authorities of a Koran Reading in Hagia Sophia,” *Hellenic Republic Ministry of Public Affairs*, 6 June 2016. [Online](#).

interpretations produce a different set of places.”³ However, he concedes that this division is not an entirely strict one, for “this simultaneity of places offers an abundant opportunity for overlap and convergence.”⁴

Chapter 5 suggested some ways in which the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia showcase a coexistence of religious and secular uses, a cohabitation of religious and secular space, and an intersection of religious and secular values. However, there is also competition between these different views and identities. This is not a peaceful coexistence but one that is regularly renegotiated. These are sites that were made and unmade; sacralized, secularized, de-secularized, and re-sacralized at different points in their complex lives. They therefore are excellent examples for investigating the (contested) fluidity between the sacred, the secular, and the religious.

Simultaneously, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia reveal the ways in which religion resurfaces in the modern world. Heritage has become a space for religious revival. These developments further confirm the failure of the secularization theory. Though it has generally fallen out of favor with many scholars today, there is still a tendency in some academic and public circles to equate secularization with progress, and religion with backwardness (as the Hellenic Republic Ministry of Public Affairs statement reveals). The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia not only challenge this lingering notion, but they also present alternate ways of understanding what heritage sites can do and can be.

³ Thomas S. Bremer, “Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 34.

⁴ Bremer, “Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places,” 34.

This chapter examines the (in)compatibility of religious and heritage (or “secular” or “tourist”) uses of historic sites in order to address dissonance over the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia. Central to this dissonance are questions of these sites’ significance, their use as religious *and/or* heritage places. To use Daniel Olsen’s words, are there ways “to mediate between religious goals and the operation of the tourism [or heritage] industry”?⁵ If Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth, and J.E. Tunbridge are correct that “one of the principal causes of heritage contestation on a global scale” is the fact that “landscapes of tourism consumption are simultaneously people’s sacred places,”⁶ then, most importantly for the purposes of this project, how can we better balance the priorities of religious communities with those of the heritage industry at such sites, to make them sustainable and compatible for local and future communities? In particular, I argue that there needs to be more sensitivity to the dynamics and tensions of shared religious and non-religious engagements, modes, and dispositions within the same site.

Hybrid Spaces and Newfound Places

Societal transformations have played an important role in the changing demands placed on the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. After a long history of repurposing, there are notable differences in their religious identities, use, and access today. The Rotunda is officially a monument and museum, though the Orthodox Church has special, limited access to the site. Hagia

⁵ Daniel H. Olsen, “Management Issues for Religious Heritage Attractions,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 105.

⁶ Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth, and J.E. Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture, and Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 24.

Sophia is legally a mosque, but is open to all visitors, regardless of their participation in religious rituals or not. Yet the two sites are both hybrid spaces in two significant ways. They are of hybrid use and access (religious and heritage) and of hybrid identity (sacred and secular). This hybridity can be seen at many other heritage sites today—such as the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba, Spain or Stonehenge in Salisbury, England—and therefore its prevalence presents a compelling reason to study the opportunities it presents.

By conceptualizing how religious heritage places can successfully be loci for diverse, overlapping uses within the same site, we can consider ways to accommodate dissonance while still ensuring responsible, thoughtful stewardship of historic sites. I examine Veronica della Dora’s concept of “infrasecular geographies” in order, first, to argue that hybrid spaces can create new, better balanced, and more ethical places out of religious heritage, and second, to contend that this approach may provide a helpful way out of the binary assumption that there is only one “authentic” use or representation of a historic site. Hybrid or “infrasecular” sites *are* authentic places.

Infrasecular Geographies

Capturing the complex relationship and intersection of religious and heritage practices at historic sites is a difficult endeavor. Many different terms have been proposed

as a result, including “religious heritage complex”⁷ and “simultaneity of places.”⁸ In particular, the concept of “infrasecular geographies” is valuable for approaching the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia because it not only gives us a nuanced way to identify these complex places, but allows us to imagine their potentials as well.

Coined by geographer Veronica della Dora, the term “infrasecular” refers to a “spatial paradigm able to capture the complexity of multi-layered coexistences and materialities; a paradigm able to bring to light ‘the stuff in-between’.”⁹ It is an approach that allows us to understand how geographies—that is, spaces and landscapes—are “shaped and sustained through continuous processes of unmaking and remaking,” and it takes into account the changing character of and the evolving relationship between the secular and the sacred at religious sites today.¹⁰ Dora writes, “The term ‘infrasecular’

⁷ Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales propose the term “religious heritage complex.” They argue that “a simple passage from spiritual practices to heritage sacredness” does not capture the more complex and even ambiguous relationship between religion and cultural heritage. Rather, they propose a new lens “to capture the coexistence of two different layers of values attributed to religious practices and materiality,” what they have labelled the “religious heritage complex.” This theoretical tool “describes the continuity between the *habitus* of conservation of the past within religious traditions and a conscious *policy* regarding the care of the past in heritage contexts.” In “Introduction,” in *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation, and Christianity*, ed. Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 6.

⁸ Thomas S. Bremer offers the concept “simultaneity of places.” He writes: “Neither their religious quality nor their touristic character can make a total claim on these places – they remain both religious and touristic, occupied by both religious adherents and other tourists whose respective experiences of the site are quite different from each other.” Though he acknowledges there is overlap, he nevertheless argues that “The hybridity of these sites does not allow a seamless blending of the two; careful observations reveal clear distinctions between the places of religion and the places of tourism.” In “Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places,” 30.

⁹ Veronica della Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies: Making, Unmaking and Remaking Sacred Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42:1 (2018): 45.

¹⁰ Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies,” 45. Dora’s concept of sacred space challenges that of Mircea Eliade, who wrote “Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (*The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959], 26). Whereas Eliade understood sacred space as self-bounded and geographically fixed, Dora and other scholars have challenged the contained-ness of sacred space. She argues, “Sacred space came into being through its users’

might be more effective than ‘postsecular’ in capturing the complexity of a society in which the secular and the religious coexist, overlap and compete.” She clarifies: “While the term ‘post-’ (*Lat.* ‘after’) sets up binaries (i.e. ‘after’ vs. ‘before’), ‘infra-’ challenges them. It can at once designate a substratum [*infra* = *Lat.* ‘under’] and an interstitial space [*intra* = *Lat.* ‘between’], something that lies underneath and in-between binaries.”¹¹ In Chapter 5, I considered how the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia could be framed as postsecular places, given that their present-day statuses provided a critique of secular ideology’s assumptions. However, the term infrasecular more carefully contextualizes and represents these multifaceted religious sites, an argument I return to shortly.

Deploying the concept of the infrasecular “highlights the interstitiality of religion’s ‘invisible visibilities’, that is, aspects of historically dominating religions that are so deeply embedded in a society’s collective memory, culture, values, institutions, everyday speech, and in the landscape that they become unseen.”¹² In other words, by refusing to assume we are in a post(-)secular society, it acknowledges how deeply rooted religion is in society. We may not even notice its manifestations, such as the daily toll of a church bell—until something culturally foreign, such as the Muslim call to prayer projected from minarets in the United States, draws attention to it.¹³ Thus, an infrasecular approach can draw out religion from areas deemed secular—like the heritage industry.

performances and the (often conflicting) meanings they ascribed to it. Sacred space was not eternal and immutable, but *in the constant making*” (51).

¹¹ Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies,” 48. Dora explains that the preposition *intra* was conflated with *infra* in Late Antiquity and that modern speech continues to adopt “between” as a second connotation of *infra*, even though this latter preposition means “under.”

¹² Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies,” 48.

¹³ Religion scholar Isaac Weiner, whose work I engaged with in Chapter 1, notes how religious sounds, like the daily toll of church bells in American towns, can permeate sonic landscapes without residents’ active

The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are excellent examples of infrasecular geographies. Over the centuries, the sacred, secular, and religious natures of these sites have been made and remade multiple times. In large part, what makes them so fascinatingly rich is their history of repurposing. Framing the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as infrasecular geographies helps capture this complex and ongoing dynamic and provides better context for the active dissonance experienced at them. After all, cohabitation and competition, between belief and non-belief, are prime characteristics of infrasecular spaces.¹⁴ The boundaries of their cultural and religious identities are in constant negotiation, continuously subjected to processes of hybridization.

Religion and religious-making practices cut through heritage-making discourses in multiple ways, from stakeholders' demands for religious interactions with historic sites to the very terminology used to understand the significance of heritage—numinous, sacred, sacrosanct.¹⁵ Though some scholars and public commentators continue to debate religion's disappearing role, an approach informed by infrasecular geographies encourages us to consider the ways in which religion has become so deeply embedded in societal structures so as to have nearly disappeared from our sight—and from our other senses as well.

recognition—except when the sound is foreign and therefore jarring, such as the Muslim call to prayer projected from minarets in the United States. See: *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Dora writes that the infrasecular “highlights the dialectical ‘visibilities’ of religion, the contemporaneous co-habitations, clashes, and intersections between different forms of belief and nonbelief which we see and experience on a daily basis.” In “Infrasecular Geographies,” 49.

¹⁵ For instance, according to Siân Jones, authentic heritage has a “magical, almost numinous, quality.” In “Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves: Beyond the Deconstruction of Authenticity,” *Journal of Material Culture* 15:2 (2010): 193.

Dora's paradigm is especially helpful for approaching dissonant religious heritage sites, in which different forms of engagement intersect and conflict in the same space. It acknowledges a continuous and ongoing multiplicity of perspectives, just as it circumvents any assumptions inherent to post(-)secularism's temporality. It reveals the ebbs and flows of religious presence in society and it suggests a new role for religious monuments in urban mnemonic landscapes today. Furthermore, it can enable heritage scholars and professionals to acknowledge the ways in which emotions and memories become entangled at religious sites, and how closing those sites to religious activity has the potential to raise "significant emotional and psychological issues."¹⁶ The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are certainly emotional sites, in which the very act of naming these sites as monuments, museums, mosques, or churches has different, powerful consequences on stakeholder communities. Having the awareness of and vocabulary for identifying the different effects of contested historic sites is an important component of the management of religious heritage and helps craft a nuanced understanding of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia.

In the case of the Rotunda, its prominent status as a monument and its secondary one as a church is particularly surprising. As Dora notes, "in Orthodox countries like Greece, where church demand is high and churches enjoy a different sacramental status (as 'houses of God' as opposed to simple congregational sites), these transformations, adaptations and coexistences would be inconceivable."¹⁷ And yet, the Rotunda is precisely one of these transformed, adapted sites in which different uses coexist in the

¹⁶ Dora, "Infrasecular Geographies," 65.

¹⁷ Dora, "Infrasecular Geographies," 64.

same space. Perhaps this is because the Rotunda was not originally built as a church—it was likely a mausoleum or temple, as Chapter 1 explored—and perhaps because there are no visible markers, at least from the outside of the building, that it is a Christian place. The stakes of the Rotunda’s Christian use and identity are therefore different than other Byzantine buildings in Thessaloniki. However, for some stakeholders, the non-church use of the Rotunda was and remains inconceivable. This context helps explain why the twentieth-century history of the site is so convoluted.

Furthermore, understanding the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as infrasecular geographies calls attention not only to their religious and heritage uses, but to a third and fourth dimension of these sites: as educational and performative spaces. Though the Rotunda may not function as we might typically expect of a museum—in that there are no objects on display behind a protective barrier—there have nevertheless been some special museum exhibitions in the space. For instance, in fall 2019, the Rotunda hosted an exhibition titled “The Splendour of Mosaics: Originals and Replicas from Thessaloniki and Ravenna.”¹⁸ It placed the two cities’ famous Byzantine mosaics in conversation, and visitors were invited to visually identify the differences.¹⁹ Cultural events are often musical in nature, taking advantage of the building’s impressive acoustics to create unique performances. Meanwhile, at Hagia Sophia, the Cultural Center by the site’s exit provides an informative introduction to Islam and Turkey’s

¹⁸ In Greek, the exhibition was titled: Η λάμψη του ψηφιδωτού. Αυθεντικά και αντίγραφα από τη Θεσσαλονίκη και τη Ραβέννα. It was on display inside the Rotunda from 11 July to 30 October 2019.

¹⁹ Ravenna, a city in the northeast of Italy, is world-renowned for its fifth- and sixth-century mosaics. In 540 CE, it was made the western capital of Emperor Justinian’s empire, known as the “Constantinople of the West.” Today, the buildings in which these mosaics are located are recognized as UNESCO World Heritage sites. In “Early Christian Monuments of Ravenna,” *UNESCO*, n.d. [Online](#).

complex history, making visits to the mosque an opportunity for visitors to learn more about religion. Moreover, during the five daily prayers, Hagia Sophia becomes a performative space, in which bodies align and move in tandem in the men's section while non-praying visitors photograph and film the event. These different dimensions to the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia invite different materials, people, rituals, and even memories, within the same site.

The concept of infrasecular geographies is also helpful for contextualizing the cities of Thessaloniki and Istanbul in the present. Dora explains that urban landscapes are “dynamic palimpsests whose layers move simultaneously at different speeds and scales; as three-dimensional, multilayered terrains regulated by different ‘power geometries’ (Massey, 1994); as sites of ‘continuous dialogue and struggle among different forces’ (Luz, 2013: 59).”²⁰ This project, in part, has been a narration of the palimpsestic histories of these cities. Different religious communities—Christians, Jews, Muslims—coexisted and clashed, and secular and religious forces conflicted with early twentieth-century national transformations, pitting the educated, secular elite against the religious, traditional, rural non-elite. Secularizing and sacralizing forces cut through Thessaloniki and Istanbul in different ways, at different times, with different levels of success, as politicians and urban planners decided which areas to preserve for posterity and which areas to open for development. The ancient cities continue to emerge within the modern urban landscapes, conflating and collapsing time and space. Framing Thessaloniki and Istanbul as infrasecular geographies helps contextualize the complex relationship

²⁰ Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies,” 64.

between religion and secularity as it is reflected in their urban landscapes, and in their monuments and museums more specifically.

As infrasecular landscapes, the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia have a history of continuity and discontinuity that should inform their management and preservation. As heritage scholar Marilena Alivizatou perceptively notes, preservation initiatives that do not allow heritage to grow and transform may be driven by “a deeper notion of an endangered cultural authenticity: the idea that there is a pure essence and value of heritage embedded in objects, places, and practices that provides an unbroken connection with the past and needs to be preserved intact into the future.”²¹ Yet I argue that transformation in fact *promotes* continuity, one that is centered on local needs and responses. In other words, the concept of authenticity is often thought to mean that you can only choose one type of use or representation (i.e., its “pure” essence), but an infrasecular geographies approach reveals that there is no single meaning to religious heritage sites. Different pasts and presents can coexist within the same space. Heritage-making does not have to be understood as simply a one-way transformation (from religious to secular, from interaction to information and display). As I suggest in the following section, by enabling the meaning of cultural heritage to grow and evolve, and by allowing the religious use of formerly religious historic sites, heritage can become more relevant and, I argue, even more authentic to a larger set of stakeholders.

²¹ Marilena Alivizatou, *Intangible Heritage and the Museum: New Perspectives on Cultural Heritage* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2012), 189.

Authenticity

Dissonance over heritage frequently boils down to questions of authenticity. Is the “authentic” identity or use of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia that of a church, a mosque, or a museum? Is it more “authentic” for a religious heritage site to function as a religious space? Or is the secularized heritage use of such a site more “authentic” to worldviews and sensibilities that prioritize accessibility, openness, and neutrality? Are there more “authentic” ways of preserving and managing religious heritage sites? Here I consider the ways in which authenticity is a deeply important but problematic concept in heritage disputes.

The term authenticity is very difficult to define.²² The concept is used both as a qualifying factor—an essential criterion for securing heritage status²³—and as a quality factor—confirming the inherent value of a heritage resource. Authenticity is alternatively defined as “truthfulness”²⁴ or that which is “traditional,”²⁵ “original,”²⁶ or “genuine.”²⁷ This notion importantly lends credibility to and assuages any anxieties visitors may have about cultural heritage.

²² Though “authenticity is arguably the single most important property of archaeological finds and exhibits,” Cornelius Holtorf notes, there are certainly “theoretical difficulties in defining it.” In *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2005), 115.

²³ “Meeting on Authenticity and Integrity in an African Context,” *UNESCO*, n.d. [Online](#).

²⁴ Christina Cameron, “From Warsaw to Mostar: The World Heritage Committee and Authenticity,” *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 39: 2/3 (2008): 20.

²⁵ John P. Taylor, “Authenticity and Sincerity in Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 28:1 (2001): 9.

²⁶ UNESCO, “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention” (Paris, 1978).

²⁷ Deepak Chhabra, Robert Healy, and Erin Sills, “Staged Authenticity and Heritage Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 30:3 (2003): 704.

The word authenticity is not actually found in UNESCO's 1972 World Heritage Convention but is defined in the committee's main procedural document, the 1977 *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. Here, authenticity is an essential criterion that a cultural property must possess in order to qualify as a World Heritage site. More specifically, the authenticity of a cultural property is tested through its "design, materials, workmanship and setting."²⁸ The term authenticity is not limited "to original form and structure, but includes all subsequent modifications and additions, over the course of time, which in themselves possess artistic or historical values."²⁹ In other words, as heritage conservator Herb Stovel describes, authenticity could perhaps be understood "as the ability of a property to convey its significance over time."³⁰

The Operation Guidelines' definition of authenticity is rather narrow and somewhat vague. In 1994, ICOMOS produced the Nara Document to address some of the limitations presented by this definition. The document had two aims in mind: First, to better define the concept of authenticity, and second, to recognize differing worldviews on this notion, and to therefore adopt a more dynamic approach to the term. In the Nara Document, authenticity is understood as genuineness, the parameters of which have been extended beyond the Operational Guidelines, to include "form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and

²⁸ "Operational Guidelines."

²⁹ "Operational Guidelines."

³⁰ Herb Stovel, "Effective Use of Authenticity and Integrity as World Heritage Qualifying Conditions," *City & Time* 2:3 (2007): 21.

feeling, and other internal and external factors.”³¹ In other words, as heritage expert Christina Cameron notes, the notion of authenticity has been expanded to its associative powers; that is, an increasing importance has been given to cultural practices rather than just the physical cultural spaces that these practices inhabit.³²

In many ways, authenticity presupposes stability, or a “natural state” against which cultural property can be measured and compared. This materialist approach has since been challenged by what heritage scholar Siân Jones terms the constructivist approach, wherein the notion of authenticity is recognized to be a cultural construct, a strategic tool or quality deployed for religious, cultural, political, and other purposes. Authenticity is increasingly seen as dynamic, performative, and context-specific. For proponents of this approach, authenticity is negotiable, or “a contested process.”³³ It may represent the past but it reflects the needs of the present.

In her work, Jones offers a third way of understanding authenticity, defining it as “*a product of the relationships between things.*”³⁴ That is, authenticity is constructed by those “relationships embodied by the cultural biographies of objects, buildings, and places, from their origins to the present day.”³⁵ She recognizes that these relationships can be manipulated, a point that Helaine Silverman echoes in her own work: “The

³¹ Article 13 of ICOMOS, “The Nara Document of Authenticity (1994),” Nara, Japan, 1994.

³² Cameron, “From Warsaw to Mostar,” 23.

³³ Jones, “Negotiating Authentic Objects,” 199.

³⁴ Siân Jones, “Experiencing Authenticity at Heritage Sites: Some Implications for Heritage Management and Conservation,” *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* 11:2 (2009): 144. Emphasis in the original.

³⁵ Jones, “Experiencing Authenticity at Heritage Sites,” 144.

manipulability of authenticity carries a potential to legitimate/delegitimate, and this has tremendous significance for heritage, for instance, in issues of collective identity and social status.”³⁶ Authenticity, therefore, is a constructed category and a discursive move.³⁷

Authenticity and the sacred intersect in complex ways at religious heritage sites. Daniel Levi and Sara Kocher found that perceived authenticity was strongly linked to the perception of sacredness,³⁸ while Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy note that, “This search for truth, enlightenment, or an authentic experience with the divine or holy leads people to travel to sacrosanct sites that have been ritually separated from the profane space of everyday life.”³⁹ There is thus a distinction between authenticity of place and authenticity of experience, though the two are mutually constituted.⁴⁰ There is a performative aspect to authenticity, embodied by those who watch the religious rituals unfold (such as non-praying visitors to Hagia Sophia Mosque, observing men performing their daily prayers) and by those who immerse themselves in the site through their own participation in rituals.

³⁶ Helaine Silverman, “Heritage and Authenticity,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, ed. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 69.

³⁷ John E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth write: “Heritage is therefore what and where we say it is: it is the ‘we’ in these contexts, not the object itself, that determines the authenticity” (*Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* [Chichester and New York: J. Wiley, 1996], 11).

³⁸ Daniel Levi and Sara Kocher, “Perception of Sacredness at Heritage Religious Sites,” *Environment and Behavior* 45:7 (2013): 924.

³⁹ Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen, “Tourism and Religious Journeys,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

⁴⁰ Levi and Kocher write, “Observing and participating in religious activities helped to define these sites as authentic sacred places.” In “Perception of Sacredness,” 926.

On the other hand, Levi and Kocher add, “Inauthenticity related to factors that reduced the perception of sacredness at the site, such as entrance fees, monks with cell phones, inappropriate tourist behavior, and modern additions to the site.”⁴¹ There is therefore a delicate balance in the *making* of authentic religious places and experiences that remain accessible to fairly wide audiences. They can easily be *unmade*—the aura of authenticity can be removed—through behaviors visitors do not expect to see. Modern additions to a site may not correspond with traditional understandings of religious places. Indeed, the presence of vending machines at Hagia Sophia Mosque, which sell cheap, disposable veils and gowns, may seem like an inauthentic addition to the site, especially when compared to the absence of such machines at other mosques in Istanbul. Paradoxically, however, this “commercial” aspect of the site is what enables unprepared visitors to access the site in more “authentic” ways—by dressing the part.

In light of the above, I argue that a religious heritage site best exhibits its authenticity when it preserves, and reflects through usage, its multiple layers of history. These layers are best represented when both religious and non-religious engagements, modes, and moods are permitted within the same site, thus reflecting the complex, evolving, negotiable relationships stakeholders cultivate with historic buildings. Said differently, the most authentic approach to heritage is one that embraces the infrasecularity of a site, and an authentic religious heritage site is one that encapsulates both aspects of the site—religious *and* heritage-related.

⁴¹ Levi and Kocher, “Perception of Sacredness,” 922.

Places Beyond the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia

At the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, religious and secular uses coexist in the same space, in thought-provoking and dynamic ways. However, I wish to make clear that they are not necessarily models to be imitated, but rather illustrative examples. There are many other heritage sites that could be considered. Within Europe—the geographical scope of this project—we find the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain and Stonehenge in Salisbury, England, two examples I briefly consider in this section. These UNESCO World Heritage sites are loci for contested heritage, between two religious groups in the case of the Mosque-Cathedral and between a religious group and the state in the case of Stonehenge. Attempts to address the active dissonance at these sites have ebbed and flowed. Some quieter periods can suddenly erupt into wider conflict, and other moments find peaceful, though sometimes only temporary, solutions.

In what follows, I provide a brief historical overview of the Mosque-Cathedral and Stonehenge; I summarize recent conflicts over their ownership, use, and representation; and I consider how an infrasecular geographies framework can help contextualize their dissonance. In doing so, I aim to highlight two main ideas. First, dissonance over religious heritage is not unique to the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia but is something that affects heritage sites more broadly. Second, I explore what the “balance” of different site usage and identities can look like at other religious heritage places, and I identify some of the stakes of this balance in order to emphasize the consequences of heritage management and preservation decisions on religious community members and society more broadly.

Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba

Whereas there exist many examples of historic churches converted into mosques—the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia among them—the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba is a less common example of a mosque converted into a church.⁴² It also has a complex history of repurposing. The Mosque-Cathedral was built in 785 CE on the orders of Abd al-Rahman I, the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty that ruled the Iberian peninsula for almost three centuries. According to traditional accounts, however, a Christian basilica had previously stood on the site, something that the Catholic Church’s modern archaeological projects have sought to confirm.⁴³ The mosque underwent many expansions up until the end of the tenth century. In 1236, it was converted into a cathedral after members of the *Reconquista*—a centuries-long Christian campaign to expel Muslims from Iberia—captured the city. However, it was not until the sixteenth century that the building underwent significant architectural adaptations befitting its new purpose. Using the mosque as a frame for the new cathedral, a cruciform Renaissance church was constructed into the site and a bell tower enveloped the old minaret (Figures 51–52). According to D. Fairchild Ruggles, this act may be the reason the mosque still

⁴² Other examples include the Mosque of Cristo de la Luz in Toledo, Spain (which was built in 999 and converted into a church less than a century later) and the Church of Nossa Senhora da Anunciação in Mértola, Portugal (likely built in the twelfth century and converted into a mosque not long after). Most of these mosques-turned-churches are located on the Iberian peninsula.

⁴³ Three aspects of the Mosque-Cathedral site serve as evidence of this claim. First, there is an information panel that informs visitors that a basilica predates the mosque: “In the subsoil of the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba, the archaeological remains of the episcopal complex of San Vicente can be found.” Second, there is a subterranean display of archaeological remains of the purported church, which are visible through a Plexiglass viewing window on the floor. Third, there are Visigothic and Roman objects on display, in the Museo de San Vicente which was created inside the Mosque-Cathedral. Significantly, much of this evidence, though uncovered in the early twentieth century, was not put on display until the twenty-first century, likely in response to demands made for the Muslim use of the site. We therefore see how archaeological evidence serves as an important Christian claim to the site.



Figure 51: A cruciform Renaissance church was constructed into the former mosque of the Mosque-Cathedral. Source: Toni Castillo Quero.



Figure 52: The Mosque-Cathedral's bell tower encloses the site's former minaret (2021).

stands today, and thus we see again—as we did with the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia—how the forces of destruction and preservation can be two sides of the same coin.⁴⁴

Today, the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba, which was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1984, is a locus of active dissonance, between those who wish to preserve its Muslim heritage and the Catholic Church, which has claimed the site as its own. One commentator has described the Mosque-Cathedral as an “ideological micro-battlefield.”⁴⁵ Starting in the 1990s, the Cathedral Chapter of Córdoba, the branch of the Catholic Church that currently administers the site, gradually removed “Mosque” from the monument’s title in its brochures and signage.⁴⁶ In 2006, it registered the Mosque-Cathedral in its own name, an act that spawned both local and international outcry.⁴⁷ In 2010, the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization released a statement condemning the name change, calling it “an attempt to obliterate the landmarks of Islamic history in Andalusia, and a provocation for Muslims around the world, especially

⁴⁴ D. Fairchild Ruggles, “The Stratigraphy of Forgetting: The Great Mosque of Cordoba and Its Contested Legacy,” in *Contested Cultural Heritage: Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World*, ed. Helaine Silverman (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2011), 55.

⁴⁵ Antonio Urquizar-Herrera, “The Islamic Monuments of Spain: Four Centuries Ago and Today,” *Oxford University Press Blog*, 6 February 2018. [Online](#).

⁴⁶ Brian Rosa and Jaime Jover-Báez explain that this local chapter of the Catholic Church has “downplayed the building’s Muslim past, including changing its name from the ‘Mosque-Cathedral’ to the ‘Cathedral, former Mosque’, to simply the ‘Cathedral’ or ‘Holy Church’.” In “Contested Urban Heritage: Discourses of Meaning and Ownership of the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba, Spain,” *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 4: 1–2 (2017): 129.

⁴⁷ However, this fact was not made public until 2010, when a Professor of Law at the University of Córdoba became curious about who owned the Mosque-Cathedral and discovered that the local chapter of the Catholic Church, through the use of these *immatriculaciones* (property registrations), had claimed the property and registered thousands of other buildings presumed to be public properties. In Rosa and Jover-Báez, “Contested Urban Heritage,” 129, 144–45.

Muslims of Spain.”⁴⁸ As these developments were occurring, Spanish Muslims lobbied the Catholic Church for permission to pray inside the building, and the *Junta Islámica*, or Islamic Council, lodged a formal request with the Vatican. Both these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

The conflict has continued. In 2010, for instance, a fight broke out when a group of Austrian Muslim visitors performed prayer at the site’s *qibla* (an architectural feature that indicates the direction of prayer). Two people were arrested and two guards were injured. In response, the Islamic Council’s president, Mansur Escudero, criticized the management of the site, stating, “They publicise the building as a mosque because that brings in tourists, but they do not allow the Muslims who pay money to go inside to pray.”⁴⁹ For such stakeholders, Muslim religious use of the site could serve as a symbolic gesture of religious inclusivity or is understood to even be a historical right. Provocatively, the local bishop’s office released a statement reiterating their ban on Muslim prayers, asserting that, “The shared use of the cathedral by Catholics and Muslims would not contribute to the peaceful coexistence of the two beliefs.”⁵⁰ It also emphasized that a church had once stood on the site prior to the construction of the mosque.

In the past decade, the Catholic Church has struggled to maintain its legal ownership of the Mosque-Cathedral. In 2013, hundreds of thousands of people signed a

⁴⁸ Quoted in Eric Calderwood, “The Reconquista of the Mosque of Córdoba,” *Foreign Policy*, 10 April 2015. [Online](#).

⁴⁹ Quoted in Giles Tremlett, “Two Arrested After Fight in Cordoba’s Former Mosque,” *The Guardian*, 1 April 2010. [Online](#).

⁵⁰ Quoted in Tremlett, “Two Arrested After Fight in Cordoba’s Former Mosque.”

petition requesting that the site be managed by the local authority rather than the Church “in order to conserve its cultural heritage.”⁵¹ In 2016, the Córdoba city council “dealt a blow to the Catholic church’s claim of legal ownership,” declaring that the Mosque-Cathedral does not belong to the church or any other organization or individual.⁵² Council Secretary General Valeriano Lavela argued, in language echoing UNESCO rhetoric, that the true owners are “each and every citizen of the world from whatever epoch.”⁵³ Just as it is a site of contention between two religious traditions, the Mosque-Cathedral is also embattled in a “church-secularist contestation” over the ownership of Spanish monuments.⁵⁴

The legal implications of the council’s decision, however, are unclear. The Cathedral Chapter of Córdoba continues to manage the Mosque-Cathedral, as confirmed during my 2021 tour of the site and the site’s official website. Though colloquially called the *mezquita* (mosque) by locals, the Mosque-Cathedral serves as the city’s cathedral and provides daily mass services, “a site of clear importance to Catholic residents as the ‘mother church’ of the entire region.”⁵⁵ Simultaneously, the site has museum-like qualities: entrance fees, audio guide rentals, and information panels. However, all the interpretative materials are produced by the Cathedral Chapter, which thus controls

⁵¹ Stephen Burgen, “Córdoba Rejects Catholic Church’s Claim to Own Mosque-Cathedral,” *The Guardian*, 13 March 2016. [Online](#).

⁵² Burgen, “Córdoba Rejects Catholic Church’s Claim.”

⁵³ Burgen, “Córdoba Rejects Catholic Church’s Claim.”

⁵⁴ Michael Dumper, *Power, Piety, and People: The Politics of Holy Cities in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁵⁵ Rosa and Jover-Báez, “Contested Urban Heritage,” 139.

visitors' understanding of the site. Scholars Brian Rosa and Jaime Jover-Báez argue that the Church has used tourist visits as “an opportunity for evangelization.”⁵⁶

In sum, the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba is an ongoing site of negotiation that raises critical questions of ownership, use, and representation. Here, the local chapter of the Catholic Church manages (and, debatably, legally owns) the site, but heritage specialists have voiced their concern over the Church's erasure of the site's Islamic history and Muslim organizations have unsuccessfully made calls to perform religious rituals in the space. In some ways, the Mosque-Cathedral serves as the inverse of Hagia Sophia, where Muslims have religious access to the site when Christians do not—or at least not through *formal* services. I am not aware of any instances of Christians being prevented from praying in Hagia Sophia, unlike the Mosque-Cathedral where Muslims are actively deterred from praying in the space. There are important differences between these cases as well: Opponents to Hagia Sophia's conversion have challenged its *religious use* (or perhaps its Muslim use more specifically), whereas critics of the Mosque-Cathedral have opposed its *religious management*.

The Mosque-Cathedral's palimpsestic history plays a significant role in the site's dissonance. If we approach the site as an infrasecular place—where multiple meanings can coincide—then permitting Muslims to also religiously engage with the space could arguably be a more authentic representation of the *Mosque-Cathedral*.⁵⁷ The site thus reveals that hybrid use may refer not only to secular and religious uses, but also to multi-

⁵⁶ Rosa and Jover-Báez, “Contested Urban Heritage,” 139.

⁵⁷ A similar argument could be made about Hagia Sophia vis-à-vis Christian interactions, a topic I return to in the Conclusion.

faith use. The Church, however, has taken an exclusionary stance, with Islamophobia likely playing an important role in these debates, and thus heritage management also necessitates a sensitivity to these dynamics. In part, more clearly defining the role of the Church in the site's ownership and management could alleviate some of these challenges.

There are high stakes in permitting or restricting Muslim religious engagements with this Spanish site. Conflicts over the Mosque-Cathedral in part boil down to a contested view of what constitutes Spanish history and identity. For instance, is Moorish history a part of or distinct from Spain's heritage? Are Muslim immigrants Spaniards or outsiders? Efforts to protect and promote Spain's Islamic heritage have intensified in recent years, such as under the direction of the *Fundación de Cultura Islámica*, or Islamic Culture Foundation,⁵⁸ an organization that acknowledges how education is a crucial aspect of embracing intercultural understandings of religious heritage. Furthermore, the Mosque-Cathedral has been understood by scholars and commentators as a bellwether for determining the future of Islam in Europe.⁵⁹ These stakes mean that its current religious usage and control may very well change in the coming years.

Stonehenge

Built approximately 4,000-5,000 years ago, Stonehenge is a prehistoric monument located just west of Amesbury in England. The UNESCO-recognized site, now ruinous, consists of a ring of large, vertically-standing stones topped with connecting horizontal

⁵⁸ According to its website, the Islamic Culture Foundation is "a Spanish non-profit, apolitical and non-denominational scientific and cultural organisation established in 1982 with the aim of tearing down the walls of misunderstanding between the Western world and the Arab and Islamic world." In "The Foundation," *FUNCI*, n.d. [Online](#).

⁵⁹ Calderwood, "The Reconquista of the Mosque."

lintel stones (Figure 53). It is oriented towards the sunrise on the summer solstice. Its original function has been much debated.⁶⁰ In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, scholars theorized it had been built by Druids (high-ranking members among the ancient Celts, who in fact lived thousands of years after Stonehenge’s creation). This speculation—which “has no basis in fact but has proved enduring and influential”⁶¹—inspired the creation of a modern religion, Druidry,⁶² whose adherents began performing ceremonies at the site starting in 1905. Druids continue to do so today, but only after they reached a consensus with the state following years of prohibited access.



Figure 53: Aerial view of Stonehenge. Source: English Heritage.

⁶⁰ This incomplete knowledge, journalist Farah Nayeri notes, “is now part of its identity” (“What Was Stonehenge For? The Answer Might Be Simpler Than You Thought,” *The New York Times*, 17 February 2022. [Online](#)). Religion scholar Carole M. Cusack writes, perhaps tongue in cheek, that “Stonehenge and other such megalithic monuments are usually deemed to be temples, in part because mysterious structures are posited as religious when other, pragmatic and secular, purposes are difficult to define.” In “Charmed Circle: Stonehenge, Contemporary Paganism, and Alternative Archaeology,” *Numen* 59: 2/3: 142.

⁶¹ Cusack, “Charmed Circle,” 139. This theory was first proposed by the seventeenth-century antiquarian John Aubrey and made popular by the eighteenth-century antiquarian William Stukeley.

⁶² The Ancient Order of Druids was founded in 1781 and today there are several sects of Druids. Up until the 1960s, Druids were viewed as eccentric and bizarre, but ultimately harmless and tolerated by the state. In Penny English, “Disputing Stonehenge: Law and Access to a National Symbol,” *Entertainment Law* 1:2 (2002): 8.

Not long after Stonehenge's inscription on the British Ministry of Culture's Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act of 1979, it became a site of contestation between Druids and state authorities. In 1984, conflict erupted when English Heritage—the charity organization responsible for the stewardship of Stonehenge⁶³—set up a four-mile exclusion zone around the monument, in order to protect the site from the large influx of visitors who wished to attend the Stonehenge Free Festival, held from May to July.⁶⁴ However, this set-up did not deter some 30,000 visitors (many of whom were not Druids) from trying to access the site. During this period, fences were vandalized and destroyed, and trees were cut down and holes dug in the prehistoric mounds. Druids and other Pagan groups were subsequently banned from the site. They nevertheless showed up the following year for the same festival, and clashed with riot police in what has been called the “Battle of the Beanfield” on 1 June 1985.⁶⁵ The government subsequently announced that the barbed-wire fence around the monument would remain in place and mass arrests occurred at the site the following year. The state intervened for the next several years, closing Stonehenge to all visitors for the summer solstices.⁶⁶

⁶³ As a national monument, Stonehenge is protected by English legislation. It is also in the ownership of the state (though not all English monuments are so).

⁶⁴ An event first held in 1974, Stonehenge Free Festival drew tens of thousands of visitors from various counterculture or alternative culture groups, including the Peace Convoy and New Age Travellers. Cusack explains that, “Those who attended Stonehenge at solar festivals experienced it as a source of ancient knowledge, and a constituent element of their identity.” In “Charmed Circle,” 148.

⁶⁵ A total of 537 people were arrested that day. An attendee of the festival, Rose Brash, states that, “It wasn't a battle, because we offered no resistance.” Quoted in Mark Hodkinson, “Rose Brash, 20, is Led Away by Police at the Battle of the Beanfield, June 1985,” *The Guardian*, 15 January 2016. [Online](#).

⁶⁶ After 1985, the Stonehenge Free Festival was permanently abolished.

In response, some Druids turned to legal structures to gain access. In 1996, for instance, leader Arthur Pendragon turned to the European Commission on Human Rights to argue against the exclusion zone, claiming it restricted his right to freedom of religion, expression, and assembly.⁶⁷ The Commission ruled against him in 1998, stating:

Whilst the Commission recognises that Druids may hold particular beliefs associated with the summer solstice, the Commission finds that the ban on observing the summer solstice in the vicinity of Stonehenge cannot be said to have had a disproportionate effect on Druids as opposed to other groups who wanted to observe the summer solstice due to different beliefs or purely secular reasons.⁶⁸

Indeed, Druids were unsuccessful in gaining lawful access to Stonehenge for years.

Penny English pinpoints a crucial matter in these clashes between state and site users, writing that, “Denying access to a national monument held in public ownership raises questions of the nature of national monuments themselves, and of the society for which they have symbolic importance.”⁶⁹ That is, it begs the question, *for whom* are such sites protected?

Druids have also clashed with archaeologists who understand Druidry to be an invented tradition and their religious claims to Stonehenge as incongruent with “scientific” interpretations of the site. This archaeological approach to the prehistoric site aligns with processual archaeology, a movement that asserts that archaeological interpretations of sites can come to objective, scientific conclusions, if the appropriate scientific method is applied. Druids have varied in their responses to these

⁶⁷ Arthur Pendragon’s application was introduced on 21 November 1995 and registered on 7 May 1996.

⁶⁸ European Court of Human Rights (31416/96) - Commission (Plenary) - Decision - PENDRAGON v. THE UNITED KINGDOM.

⁶⁹ English, “Disputing Stonehenge,” 1. Referring to the exclusion area, she writes that it resulted “in the paradox of barricades separating a publicly owned national monument from its citizens” (2).

archaeologists' accusations. For instance, some members maintain that Stonehenge was originally built by ancient Druids while others believe that tribes of the Stonehenge period "had Druid-like figures amongst their number."⁷⁰ Philip Shallcrass, who founded the British Druidic Order in 1979, promotes Druidry as a living faith and argues for the urgent need to connect to the past.⁷¹ Stonehenge's historicity provides meaning and guidance to group members just as these members, through their religious practices, give value to the site in the present.

It was not until 1999 that Druids were able to regain access rights to the site.⁷² They now form a part of a Stonehenge community, along with the charity organization English Heritage. With this recognition that Druids are valid stakeholders of the site, religion scholar Carole M. Cusack argues, "Stonehenge has been liberated from the official interpretations of archaeologists."⁷³ Today, Druids are contributors to the historical and religious interpretations of the site, bringing its management into increasing alignment with a more post-processual archaeological approach. This movement in archaeological theory acknowledges the subjectivity of archaeological interpretations,

⁷⁰ European Court of Human Rights (31416/96).

⁷¹ Philip Shallcrass stated that, "One of the things that attracts people to Druidry is the sense that it provides a link with the past. For the Druid, the past is not a static thing held fast within the dry and dusty pages of history books, but a living part of our reality." Quoted in Cusack, "Charmed Circle," 147.

⁷² A limited number of Druids were given permission to host a summer solstice ceremony in June 1999. However, approximately 200 uninvited visitors rushed the site, prompting a clash with the police. Arrests ensued and the planned celebration was cancelled. English Heritage's then-director of Stonehenge, Clews Everard, decried it a "tragedy," stating: "This is the last dawn of this millennium and so many people have worked so hard to try and make this a special event. But early this morning a large number of people ruined it for everyone." Quoted in "Police Clash with Rioters at Stonehenge," *The Guardian*, 21 June 1999. [Online](#).

⁷³ Cusack, "Charmed Circle," 153.

and it gives room to alternate, plural, and community-sourced readings of this evidence.⁷⁴ Modern Druids are among these interpreters of the past.

Once again, we have a case study that raises critical questions of ownership, use, and representation. Unlike the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba and Hagia Sophia, which are still active sites of dissonance, Stonehenge is a site in which seemingly satisfactory reconciliation between stakeholder groups has been achieved, at least for the time being. The religious access that Druids enjoy at Stonehenge is comparable to the relationship that Christians have with the Rotunda. In both cases, the religious character and use of the sites were negotiated by the state, archaeologists, interested members of the public, and religious community members. With time, these groups struck a balance between the religious and heritage uses of the sites, ultimately granting religious usage on particular days of the year.

Yet there are also important differences between Stonehenge and the Rotunda. First, it is unclear whether Stonehenge was ever originally used as a religious site,⁷⁵ whereas we have archaeological and architectural evidence that the Rotunda was used as a church soon after its construction, even if such a religious use was not its original purpose. Second, whilst archaeologists and scholars confirm Christians' historical connection to the Rotunda, they have challenged modern Druids' claim to Stonehenge. However, if postmodern archaeologist Cornelius Holtorf is correct—which I think he

⁷⁴ Post-processual archaeology, an intellectual movement that emerged in the 1980s, in Anglo-American contexts in particular, proposes that “the past must always be interpreted, and that these interpretations are inevitably partial and qualified.” In Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, “Archaeology and Indigenous Collaboration,” in *Archaeological Theory Today*, ed. Ian Hodder, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge and Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2012), 274.

⁷⁵ This question partially stems from a larger issue of how we apply the term “religion” to the prehistoric and ancient world.

is—in arguing that a site or artifact is more important for “its perceived pastness, i.e., the way it allows the past to be experienced” than for the meanings that archaeologists may assign to it, then I would argue that, in some important ways, Druids hold an even stronger stake in Stonehenge than do archaeologists.⁷⁶ Druids have found a means for making the past spiritually connected with their modern lives. Their religious experiences of Stonehenge reinterpret the past and give it meaning in the present. Thus, the site’s complex modern history challenges us to think how a monument’s infrasecularity can be an ongoing, emergent phenomenon, wherein religious use may be a modern invention.

Finding a dynamic balance between the religious and heritage uses and representations of historic sites, I argue, is central to mediating active dissonance and addressing the needs of various stakeholder communities. This balance—which will not necessarily give equal role to these different uses—will look distinct at each site and, most significantly, it should always be *open to negotiation*. As the long histories of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia have demonstrated, the boundaries of religion and religious practices at heritage sites are continuously made, unmade, and remade by stakeholders. This negotiation can further stimulate dissonance, but, I contend, can also work to resolve it.

I have primarily focused on the relationship of religious and secular uses of sites, because the early twentieth-century secularizing developments that circumscribed religious use of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia (Part I) generated some of the conflicts surrounding those sites (Part II). However, as we have seen, many other factors play

⁷⁶ Holtorf, *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas*, 127.

important roles in activating dissonance over religious heritage sites. Ingrained biases against particular groups, as with Islamophobia, is an obvious driver that may prevent the establishment of a dynamic, respected balance of uses.⁷⁷ Education aimed at promoting dialogue and embracing interculturalism is essential for mediating conflict.⁷⁸

International heritage organizations like UNESCO, in partnership with state ministries and local communities, can play an important role in implementing educational outreach.⁷⁹ However, given that such organizations still grapple with how best to manage and preserve religious heritage, scholars of religion are crucial in positively and responsibly shifting preservation and management priorities to better accommodate religious heritage. They can serve as knowledge brokers between the realms of academia, public policy, and public outreach, communicating what values and sensibilities are lost when religious access and use is curtailed at heritage sites. This study is such a contribution.

In sum, I have suggested that the concept of infrasecular geographies allows us to think of religious heritage's challenges *and* possibilities, acknowledging the contested

⁷⁷ For instance, conflicts over the recent conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque are informed not only by dissonant understandings of whether heritage sites ought to be secular spaces but also by a deep distrust of or discomfort regarding the *Muslim* use of these sites. That is, those who protest Hagia Sophia's mosque status by deploying its UNESCO World Heritage status as a rationale for circumscribing religious use—calling such usage as “verging on bigotry”—may not necessarily protest Hagia Sophia's use as a church.

⁷⁸ The term interculturalism, as I noted in Chapter 4, implies understanding, respect, and mutual exchange between cultures, whereas multiculturalism refers to a multiplicity of cultures but does not suggest anything about tolerance or exchange.

⁷⁹ By suggesting the potential role of UNESCO and like-minded international organizations, I do not intend to (re)inscribe their power as arbiters of heritage. Rather, state parties in themselves can be an important obstacle in creating opportunities for collaboration and open dialogue between different stakeholder groups. This becomes particularly tricky when religious heritage sites are the property of the state. External parties like UNESCO have the potential to make significant educational impact, if their skills are deployed effectively.

cohabitation between religion and secularity in historic places. The most authentic approach, in my view, is one that embraces the infrasecularity of these sites. That is, an authentic religious heritage site is one that can reflect—through both its use and representation—its rich, complex history. Of course, such a management strategy is much easier said than done. Chapter 7 therefore considers the practical applications of this framework by examining the sustainability of religious interactions at heritage sites.

Chapter 7: Sustainability of Religious Practices

*“Preservation does indeed secure the sites for the future, but it also takes them out of use in the present.”*¹

*“Religion, for all its abstract dimensions, is an embodied human activity that always happens in physical spaces.”*²

In Chapter 6, I concluded that the management and preservation of heritage sites should aim to find a dynamic balance between religious and heritage uses that addresses the needs and desires of a broader range of stakeholder communities. However, it is crucial that site preservation and sustainability simultaneously remain a central priority. The United Nations defines the term sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”³ Whereas preservation and conservation efforts tend to focus on physically safeguarding sites themselves, sustainability refers to the relationship between heritage sites and visitors. Sustainability efforts thus seek to ensure that visitors get the most out of their experience, without physically compromising the site.

This chapter considers whether the religious use of a heritage site presents an increased preservation burden on historic buildings. I argue that religious use of heritage

¹ Penny English, “Disputing Stonehenge: Law and Access to a National Symbol,” *Entertainment Law* 1:2 (2002): 12.

² Gretchen Buggeln, “Religion in Museum Spaces and Places,” in *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Gretchen Buggeln and Barbara Franco (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 159.

³ United Nations Brundtland Commission, 1987, quoted in “Sustainability,” *United Nations*, n.d. [Online](#). Sustainability aims for both preservation and relevance. Kate Clark writes, “For people who work with heritage, thinking about sustainability often means finding connections between heritage and the wider context for heritage places, such as land-use planning, economic development, or social inclusion.” Approaches to sustainability therefore take a wider view to sites; they contribute “to reducing the isolation of heritage by seeing it as part of a bigger narrative around place and environment.” In *The Shift Toward Values in UK Heritage Practice*, in *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions*, ed. Erica Avrami et al. (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2019), 74.

sites does not apply *additional* preservation pressures but rather presents a *different* set of preservation concerns. Yet, as geographer Daniel H. Olsen remarks, “very few researchers have examined the complex management issues endemic to important places where tourism and religion coincide.”⁴ I introduce ways in which heritage specialists can adapt management strategies in response to diverse types of site engagement, thus demonstrating how the sustainable hybrid use of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia—as “religious” and “secular” sites—is possible. In my analysis, I also examine an important issue that does not have a straightforward answer: What happens when the destruction of material goods is a form of preservation within a religious tradition?

Consuming Heritage?

When Hagia Sophia Museum was converted into a mosque in 2020, some critics voiced a concern that the religious use of the heritage site would present an increased preservation burden on the historic building. As I noted in Chapter 3, when a religious site is made into a monument and museum, it undergoes an array of transformations aimed at preserving it for future generations. How the site is used and accessed becomes closely managed, and oftentimes, involves limiting religious practices, such as the touching of icons or frescoes, the burning of incense and candles, or the use of water for purification purposes. If, later on, that historic site is once again used as a religious space, what preservation concerns arise? Is religious use inherently more consuming, more risky

⁴ Daniel H. Olsen, “Management Issues for Religious Heritage Attractions,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 105.

than secular engagements with heritage sites? Answers to these questions can have significant ramifications for the stewardship of religious heritage sites into the future.

There is certainly an anxiety among heritage specialists that religious engagements may pose a threat, for as art historian Kavita Singh remarks, “There is a fear that religion has a tendency to use things in a way that consumes them and eats them up, either destroying them through iconoclasm or loving them to death by offering them too much incense.”⁵ The primary concern, she argues, is that religious authorities will not treat these objects as “transcendent heritage”⁶ that rightfully belongs to unknown future generations.⁷ Indeed, this fear surfaced with the recent mosque conversion of Hagia Sophia Museum. A letter by the “Friends of Hagia Sophia,” signed by nearly 400 (mostly academic) individuals around the globe, is revealing:

We are concerned that the ongoing dispute over function hinders the development of a management strategy commensurate to the scale of the challenges: preservation of the historical fabric and continued visibility of the works of art of all periods, Byzantine and Ottoman; responsible management of mass tourism; and protection against the threat of earthquake. [...] Hagia Sophia is too beautiful a monument and too precious a historical document to serve as a pawn in regional politics. Successive Byzantine, Ottoman, and Turkish governments have protected it against the ravages of time and thus maintained its significance not only for themselves, but also for those to come in the future — including all of us.⁸

Their statement acknowledges the difficulties in representing and preserving the palimpsestic layers of Hagia Sophia but notes that past governments and rulers have

⁵ Kavita Singh, “Belongings” Keynote ACHS Presentation, 5th *Association of Critical Heritage Studies Biennial Conference*, University College London, United Kingdom, 28 August 2020. Online.

⁶ Transcendent heritage, according to Singh, is that which is “above and beyond individual possession.” In “Belongings.”

⁷ Singh, “Belongings.”

⁸ Friends of Hagia Sophia, “An Open Letter About the Status of Hagia Sophia,” *Medium*, 30 June 2020. [Online](#).

successfully managed this heritage. Its return to mosque status, in their view, is a political maneuver that threatens this success. Hagia Sophia is a fragile site and its use ought to reflect this condition. Implicit in this statement is that use as a mosque—its religious function—uniquely hinders its preservation for future generations, in a way that use as a museum does not.

This sentiment is echoed by Zeynep Ahunbay, Hagia Sophia’s conservation architect for twenty-five years. He contends that the best way to preserve Hagia Sophia as a “cultural treasure” is “to preserve and present it by the museum function.”⁹ Many have read Hagia Sophia’s conversion as an affront towards secular communities. If stakeholders view Hagia Sophia as a “cultural treasure” and a “world heritage site,” then it is best preserved—in terms of its physical integrity and universal value—as a museum. Similar debates have played out at the Rotunda, with some stakeholders arguing that any modifications made to the site for religious use are incompatible with, or even threatening to, the site’s monument status. In sum, these debates reveal a fear that religious use may physically endanger a site through overuse or inattention to preservation—but is this actually the case?

Sustainable Practices

Another case study, this time focusing on the White and Red Monasteries near Sohag, Egypt, is illustrative.¹⁰ Archaeologists and conservators have actively grappled

⁹ Quoted in Carlotta Gall, “Erdogan Talks of Making Hagia Sophia a Mosque Again, to International Dismay,” *The New York Times*, 8 July 2020. [Online](#).

¹⁰ My fieldwork at the White Monastery, completed in March 2016 and March and April 2019, was completed in the context of the Yale Monastic Archaeology Project South, which holds the archaeological

with the different pressures and expectations presented by the religious and heritage-oriented uses of these Coptic Christian sites, and their management and preservation strategies have significantly informed my approach to religious heritage.

The White Monastery consists of several churches—modern and ancient—and a large archaeological site. The ancient church, named Church of St. Shenoute, is constructed of stone and dates to the fifth century. It is a three-aisled basilica with exterior walls that are reminiscent of Egyptian temples.¹¹ It is still an active church which receives visitors throughout the year (Figure 54). A few miles north of the White Monastery, the Red Monastery was established in the fourth century, though its church



Figure 54: The White Monastery (2019).

concession for the site. My visits to the Red Monastery were undertaken in a vein separate from YMAP-South.

¹¹ “The Church of St. Shenoute,” *Yale in Egypt*, n.d. [Online](#).

dates to the sixth century (Figure 55). It is well known for its impressive program of wall paintings, one of the most extensive in Egypt today (Figure 56). The two sites are co-managed by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Coptic Church. The monastic communities at these two sites were reestablished in the late twentieth century, resulting in an increase in visitors and construction of guest buildings. As such, the “pace of change at these sites is currently very rapid, in sharp contrast to centuries or more or less abandonment to the dry desert climate.”¹² Visitors travel to both monasteries for religious services, just as, simultaneously, heritage specialists have undertaken, or hope to undertake, certain measures to protect the ancient sites for future generations and to make them more enticing for non-Coptic visitors as well.

Religious use of historic sites, I contend, certainly poses distinct physical preservation challenges for heritage management. Broadly, issues can include the large influxes of visitors during significant calendar days or pilgrimages, certain types of interactions with artifacts (such as the kissing of icons), and the (sometimes permanent) addition of objects to enable religious rituals and practices. The White Monastery, which has recently undergone less extensive architectural and art historical conservation than the Red Monastery, is helpful for recognizing this range of preservation risks. For instance, there is immense stress placed on the monastery every July when it becomes home to thousands of visitors during the festivities of St. Shenoute.¹³ Tents, cars, and visitors fill the compound, putting the exposed archaeological site and ancient church at

¹² Peter Grossman, Darlene Brooks-Hedstrom, et al., “The Excavation in the Monastery of Apa Shenute (Dayr Anba Shinuda) at Suhag, with an Appendix on Documentary Photography at the Monasteries of Anba Shinuda and Anba Bishoi, Suhag, by Elizabeth S. Bolman,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004): 382.

¹³ Caroline Schroeder describes the site’s transformation: “Coptic pilgrims camp in the monastery’s paths, orchard, and even inside the sanctuary of the ancient church. Tents for shelter as well as commerce are



Figure 55: The Red Monastery (2016).

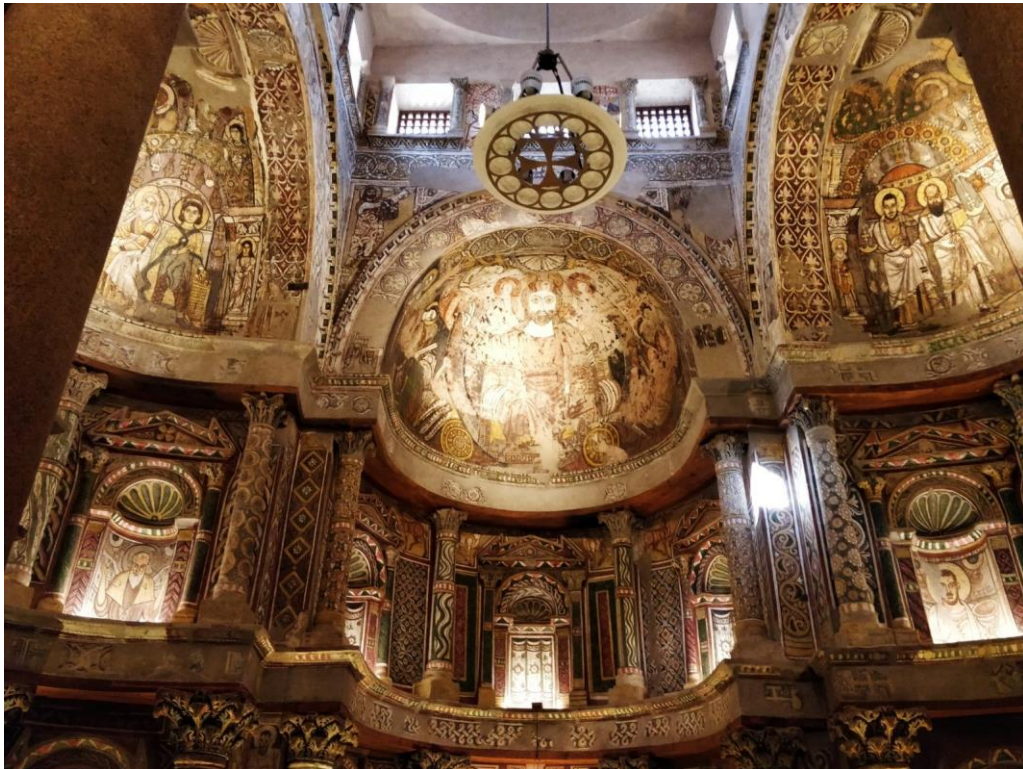


Figure 56: The Red Monastery's impressive program of wall paintings (2019).

erected in the nave." In *Monastic Bodies: Discipline and Salvation in Shenoute of Atripe* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2007), 117.

risk (Figure 57).¹⁴ During my fieldwork, I observed how visitors would at times insert scraps of papers with written prayers into the gaps of fragile bricks or walls at the Monastery, something I have also witnessed at other religious heritage sites (Figure 58). I further noted how visitors would touch fragile frescoes on the courtyard walls or climb on ancient columns for picture-taking purposes. These types of practices may threaten historic artifacts.

However, religious use of a site, I wish to make clear, does not necessarily pose *more* of a risk than more stereotypically “tourist” types of engagement. The negative impact attributed to the latter ranges from traffic congestion and pollution, inadequate trash removal, property damage (through theft, graffiti, and neglect), and the behaviors and number of such visitors which may “degrade the aesthetic quality of sacred places.”¹⁵ Tourism, as I noted in Chapter 3, is the second biggest threat to a heritage site, after development. Rather, I contend that religious use often requires *different* management strategies to ensure site sustainability.

The Red Monastery is a great example of how a preservation project managed to balance religious use of a site with conservation measures intended to safeguard a fragile ancient site.¹⁶ As an actively religious site that has undergone significant conservation

¹⁴ Nicholas Warner, “The White Monastery in Sohag: Site Management and Development Report 2010,” 6 (unpublished paper). This pressure has been noted by others who have worked at these sites, including Peter Grossman and Darlene Brooks-Hedstrom. In an article co-published with other heritage specialists, they write, “The impressive flourishing of Coptic monasticism and also lay pilgrimage to monastic sites further intensifies pressures on the art historical and archaeological record.” In “The Excavation in the Monastery of Apa Shenute,” 382.

¹⁵ Daniel Levi and Sara Kocher, “Perception of Sacredness at Heritage Religious Sites,” *Environment and Behavior* 45:7 (2013): 914.

¹⁶ The Red Monastery site underwent extensive conservation work, starting in 2002, under the direction of Elizabeth S. Bolman of Temple University. This was a USAID funded project, which completed conservation work on the sanctuary of the church in 2012 and then later focused on the nave (2015–2018).



Figure 57: During the festivities of St. Shenoute, tents, cars, and visitors fill up the White Monastery's compound, putting the exposed archaeological site and ancient church at risk (2019).



Figure 58: Visitors sometimes insert scraps of papers with written prayers into the gaps of fragile bricks or walls at the White Monastery (2019).

In Dina Bakhom, "Red Monastery Nave Conservation Project: Red Monastery Nave Conservation and Training," *USAID Final Report*, June 2018.

work, the monastery has presented unique challenges and opportunities to conservators and heritage specialists. During my fieldwork, I spoke directly with some of these professionals about the decisions they made and observed firsthand how their conservation work affects site access and use today.¹⁷ This USAID-funded project also included a multifaceted capacity building and outreach program that targeted different interest groups, including members from the local community, monks from the Red and White Monasteries, and employees for the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.¹⁸ As such, the project can be understood as a “co-production” between different stakeholder communities.¹⁹

Barriers of access were an issue of particular importance. Conservators added physical blocks in strategic areas of the church. For instance, seating was added against the walls of the church’s courtyard to make the space more welcoming *and* to create a physical barrier between visitors and fragile frescoes. A gate was also installed that prevents visitors from going up to the church’s wall paintings and potentially touching and harming them.

In other areas, conservators *removed* particular visual obstacles, such as the screen that would typically block the altar in the church. The niches in the altar, which

¹⁷ I wish to thank my interlocutors for these informative, thoughtful, and thought-provoking conversations that took place in March and April 2019. Interlocutors included Stephen Davis (YMAP project director), Sam Price (consultant structural engineer for Price & Myers), Gillian Pyke (YMAP archaeological director), James Stevenson (consultant structural engineer for Price & Myers), Alberto Urcia (YMAP surveyor), and Nicholas Warner (project director for Red Monastery Architectural Conservation project).

¹⁸ Bakhoun, “Red Monastery Nave Conservation Project,” 1.

¹⁹ Yujie Zhu defines “co-production” as a “local institutional mechanism of collaborative and cooperative work,” in which “all stakeholders at heritage sites—including experts and non-experts—should be integrated into the planning, design, interpretation, and management process.” Community is at the center of heritage governance. In *Heritage Tourism: From Problems to Possibilities* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 48.

were sealed in at some point so as to protect the paintings, are now freed from these physical and visual barriers. As a result, visitors can appreciate the wall paintings much more easily—but at a distance. Thus, one preservation intervention at religious heritage sites is to strategically deploy different types of barriers: removing some visual barriers, for instance, might prevent the need for physical ones. Or the introduction of better physical obstacles, including the complete backfilling of an exposed archaeological site (that is, refilling it with dirt), can protect fragile sites when facing huge influxes in visitor numbers.²⁰

Modern religious icons can act as another barrier to help protect ancient and fragile artifacts. For instance, if there is a fragile fresco on a wall, then placing a modern icon nearby and perhaps somewhat blocking the fresco can encourage visitors to perform acts of worship to the modern object instead. The visitor can still *visually* access the fragile artifact, but physical access would be discouraged. Indeed, the introduction of modern objects can sometimes be an easy and cheap method of addressing other preservation issues. In sites where written prayers are inserted into gaps between bricks in a wall, like at the White Monastery, one solution may be modern icons with attached boxes designed for visitors to leave prayer notes. At other churches in Egypt, such icons and boxes have been successfully introduced in front of fragile bricked walls, designated to receive such prayers.

In sum, the religious use of heritage sites does not necessarily hinder or threaten their cultural preservation or physical conservation, as some critics have suggested. It can

²⁰ These preservation measures have been proposed by Warner for the White Monastery. In “The White Monastery in Sohag,” 10–14.

present a different set of stewardship concerns but it is not inherently more harmful than more “secular” engagements with historic sites. Indeed, even some conventional museums and art galleries have begun experimenting with barriers of access in order to *enable* visitors to religiously engage with cultural artifacts on display. Traditionally, such institutions have been spaces in which the senses are restricted or heavily regulated: Objects on display are meant to be gazed at, not touched—and even then, visitors may have a limited view of an object, depending on how it is displayed. Much scholarship has addressed the secularizing forces of museum spaces, which de-contextualize and neutralize the sacred aura of religious objects in their collections.²¹ Nevertheless, some visitors continue to view displayed objects not strictly as historical or artistic objects but as actively religious ones. As with secularized religious heritage sites, museums and galleries often seek to stop these visitors from touching, kissing, and performing other religious practices before such objects. However, some institutions have recently begun to modify their approach to enable more dynamic engagements with their collections.

In particular, some museums have carved out specific spaces where barriers of access have been removed and where artifacts are intended to be used, touched, and otherwise interacted with. Some displays even encourage visitors to *add* their own objects to museum displays. Mary Nooter Roberts, for instance, examines a number of exhibitions staged by the Museum for African Art in New York and the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles since 1993 which featured recreations of

²¹ As Crispin Paine points out, museum curators also have a tendency to suppress evidence of religious conflict, or to relegate it safely to the past: “Because issues of faith are so sensitive, most museum displays on religion are celebrations of diversity, stressing exclusively the positive and ignoring conflict or oppression.” Thus, violent and ideological forms of dissonance are oftentimes glossed over in museum exhibits, rather than actively engaged with. In *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 20.

African and African-diaspora shrines, altars, prayer rooms, among other types of religious spaces.²² These displays, she writes, became *active* as visitors engaged with them:

From the offering of flowers, coins, photographs, and cigarettes to the performance of *capoeira* (an Afro-Brazilian martial art) before an altar; from assuming a prayer position before a beaded shrine to the touching of portraits of a saint to obtain sacred blessings; environments proved to be far more than passive representations of religious practices.²³

Visitors' religious engagements proved that religious objects have the capacity to "retain their power to bless, protect, and promote."²⁴ Such projects not only enable religious interactions but they also empower nonreligious visitors to better understand these interactions through tactile learning. If, as Crispin Paine argues, "museums are to fulfil their promises to reinvent themselves as places that truly belong to 'the people'" by "allowing individual people to do their own thing in their galleries," then such exhibitions are a positive step in that direction. In other words, Gretchen Buggeln suggests, museums ought to embrace the affective dimension of religious space and place, wherein "sensory experiences can lead to an apprehension of the supernatural."²⁵ Experimenting with barriers of access at heritage sites and in museums and art galleries can be an especially productive means for allowing religious engagements, retaining what UNESCO has

²² Mary Nooter Roberts, "Altar as Museum, Museum as Altar: Ethnography, Devotion, and Display," in *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2017), 49. These exhibitions included: *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (1993); *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (1995); *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (2003); *Botanica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angels* (2005); and *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (2008).

²³ Roberts, "Altar as Museum, Museum as Altar," 49.

²⁴ Roberts, "Altar as Museum, Museum as Altar," 54.

²⁵ Buggeln, "Religion in Museum Spaces and Places," 162.

termed the “distinct spiritual nature” of heritage without presenting additional preservation burdens on sites and objects.

When Destruction is Preservation

Thus far, this chapter has highlighted practical methods for addressing preservation concerns presented by religious use and access of heritage sites. However, what happens when destruction of objects or sites is deemed necessary for maintaining religious practices and beliefs—or, phrased differently, when destruction *is* a form of preservation? This is a phenomenon that may not affect sites like the Rotunda or Hagia Sophia, but may be a more serious consideration in other parts of the world. In parts of east Asia, for instance, religious duties may include: demonstrating respect for a spirit through demolishing an old structure and building a new one to house it; repudiating the power or existence of a deity by destroying the objects it embodies; and transmitting an object, through its sacrifice, to the ethereal world of divine beings, as an act of transformation.²⁶ Ultimately, destruction sanctifies the objects or structures. Circumscribing these destructive acts in the name of preserving heritage can therefore have important consequences for religious community members who wish to appease and interact with the divine.

Heritage scholar Anna Karlström considers this complex dynamic, arguing that spirits *are heritage* for some communities and therefore must be given consideration in

²⁶ For instance, Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders explain how, “Chinese images of the *zaojun* or ‘stove top’ (‘kitchen god’) are burned up every year, not as a sacrilege but to transport the stove lord to the more ethereal realms, where he confers with the gods of the Heavens. When he returns, he inhabits a brand new image in the kitchen.” In “What Does Iconoclasm Create? What Does Preservation Destroy? Reflections on Iconoclasm in East Asia,” in *Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, ed. Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 22.

heritage management. Discussing the December 2000 destruction of the Buddhist temple Vat Ou Mong in Vientiane, Laos by local villagers, Karlström shares the reactions of residents who explained that the ancient temple had to be destroyed in order to empower the new one. She writes that, “It was not the actual building with its original murals that they considered authentic and therefore worthy of preservation. It was rather the spirits, connected to and residing in the building that were, and still are, the heritage that the villagers wanted to maintain.”²⁷ In other words, destruction was deemed necessary for the maintenance of religious practices and beliefs.²⁸

In other cases, emphasis on continuity may run counter to the conservator’s desire to minimize change. For example, SGang Gwaay, or Anthony Island, a UNESCO World Heritage site off the west coast of Canada, is home to the last surviving Haida totem poles.²⁹ Here, the concept of continuity has meant allowing these poles to decay while resisting calls by heritage professionals to remove them to museums for conservation.³⁰ In cases like these, prioritizing the religious or spiritual elements of cultural heritage may result in management decisions that seem contrary to the spirit of heritage preservation.

Destruction may also be deemed necessary to improve the religious experience of a heritage site. For instance, in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, many older buildings

²⁷ Anna Karlström, “Spirits and the Ever-Changing Heritage,” *Material Religion* 9:3 (2013): 396. She explains that authenticity in such cases “is measured by the extent to which an object is empowered by a spirit” (398).

²⁸ Karlström, “Spirits and the Ever-Changing Heritage,” 396.

²⁹ Totem poles are monumental carvings, usually made from large trees, that depict peoples and animals such as eagles, ravens, and bears. They were produced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest to symbolize or commemorate ancestors, beliefs and legends, among other purposes.

³⁰ Herb Stovel, “Introduction,” in *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage: Papers from the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: Conserving the Sacred*, ed. Herb Stovel, Nicholas Stanley-Price, and Robert Killick (Rome: ICCROM, 2005), 4–5.

and other areas of the historic urban fabric that surrounded some of the most important mosques were destroyed so as to build better facilities to serve the thousands of pilgrims that visit these holy cities. Heritage consultant Hossam Mahdy writes that, “While many conservation professionals and organizations objected and condemned the decision, the majority of Muslims around the world fully understood and appreciated the rationale of the Saudi authorities, and in many cases praised the decision.”³¹ Here, again, there is a conflict between the religious and heritage uses of historic places and landscapes. On one end, there is a focus on preserving those sites and artifacts which are especially valuable to present-day communities, who actively engage with this heritage, while on another is a desire to protect as much of the past as possible, for future generations to appreciate.³²

In sum, preservation itself may entail destruction. Though I have argued in this chapter that religious engagements with heritage sites do not inherently place an increased preservation burden, Karlström and Mahdy’s work certainly complicates this argument in some cases. Though there are no straightforward strategies for managing such scenarios, there are a few considerations I wish to point out here. Karlström and Mahdy identify two different forms of destruction, but which both enable an improved religious experience. In the case of the Buddhist temple, destruction was informed by concerns for authenticity (of spirits). In the case of the Saudi Arabian mosques,

³¹ Hossam Mahdy, “Is Conservation of Cultural Heritage Halal? Perspectives on Heritage Values Rooted in Arabic-Islamic Traditions,” in *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions*, ed. Erica Avrami et al. (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2019), 130.

³² Of course, a complicated aspect of this dynamic rests on *whose* heritage is preserved and emphasized in the urban landscape and whose is selected for removal, a topic I addressed with Thessaloniki and Istanbul in Chapter 2, especially in the context of de-Ottomanizing these two cities. Furthermore, the expansion of religious heritage sites may entail the eviction of local residents, a controversial decision that can have significant negative effects on the well-being of hundreds or thousands of individuals. An awareness of these types of dynamics is thus crucial to the responsible preservation and management of heritage.

destruction promoted accessibility (for pilgrims). At first glance, the latter might seem less defensible. After all, one important criticism of tourism in the heritage sector is the preservation pressures placed by large quantities of visitors. However, we should also consider how expanding access to a historic site that aligns with its intended use—as a religious place—is different from expanding access for the purposes of tourism. That is, destruction that promotes usage for pilgrims can itself contribute to the authenticity of a site, by allowing a larger number of visitors to religiously engage with historic sites, as they were intended to be used. Thus, the sustainability of religious heritage sites importantly demonstrates that preservation and destruction can be two sides of the same coin.

Preserving Intangible Heritage

According to conservation professional Gamini Wijesuriya, what distinguishes religious heritage from other forms of heritage is its inherent “livingness.”³³ Architectural historian Nobuko Inaba, in line with Wijesuriya, argues that attention to the “living” aspects of heritage importantly reflects efforts to go beyond “material-oriented conservation practice of monumental heritage.”³⁴ It gives attention to “human-related/non-material aspects of heritage value and [tries] to link with the surrounding

³³ Gamini Wijesuriya, “The Past is in the Present: Perspectives in Caring for Buddhist Heritage Sites in Sri Lanka,” in *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage: Papers from the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: Conserving the Sacred*, ed. Herb Stovel, Nicholas Stanley-Price, and Robert Killick (Rome: ICCROM, 2005), 30.

³⁴ Nobuko Inaba, “The Ise Shrine and the Gion Festival,” in *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage: Papers from the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: Conserving the Sacred*, ed. Herb Stovel, Nicholas Stanley-Price, and Robert Killick (Rome: ICCROM, 2005), 44.

societies and environments.”³⁵ In other words, it emphasizes the need to preserve *intangible* heritage.

Though UNESCO and other heritage organizations have long given recognition to tangible forms of heritage—buildings, objects, and landscapes—they have increasingly acknowledged the importance of intangible heritage, formally recognizing the need to protect it in the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage*. This text defines intangible heritage as, “The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage,”³⁶ and it considers it as “a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development.”³⁷ According to heritage scholar Marilena Alivizatou, making space for intangible heritage within heritage management enables practitioners and community members, rather than outside experts, to define authenticity.³⁸ Intangible heritage provides relevance, context, and “livingness” to heritage sites.

Authenticity, as this chapter has suggested, may entail the decay and even destruction of tangible heritage in order to preserve its intangible forms. Acknowledging that the continuity of religious practices and places may require different site management strategies helps us reframe how we understand the concept of preservation.

³⁵ Inaba, “The Ise Shrine,” 45.

³⁶ UNESCO, “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” Paris, 2003.

³⁷ UNESCO, “Convention for the Safeguarding.”

³⁸ Marilena Alivizatou, *Intangible Heritage and the Museum: New Perspectives on Cultural Heritage* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2012), 191.

Moreover, incorporating religious rituals, practices, and other forms of engagements can also helpfully aid nonreligious visitors to understand why religious heritage sites are places worth preserving. Thus, preservation methods ought to actively serve communities in the present-day. And this means giving space to intangible, living heritage.

Conclusion

I opened Chapter 5 with a statement by Giles Fraser, Priest-in-Charge of St. Mary's in south London, who argued that Istanbul's Hagia Sophia was made profane when it was converted into a museum.¹ Philosopher Florin George Calian, in response, wrote: "Welcoming the end of the Hagia Sophia museum as a victory against secularism, Fraser, and those who think like him, seem oblivious to the underlying motivations for this decision, *which are political, not religious.*"² This position—that religious conversion of Hagia Sophia is more about politics than about religion—is shared by a number of scholars. Historian Brian Croke calls Hagia Sophia's conversion a "political cause"³ and *The Economist* writes that Turkish President Erdoğan is "playing religious politics."⁴

In significant ways, making mosques out of museums that were once Byzantine churches is indeed a politically charged use of heritage. Erdoğan's transformations have aimed to assert Turkey's ability to make decisions for itself, and to position the nation as the model for Islam in the Middle East and the Balkans, over other nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁵ Hagia Sophia's conversion may also be viewed as a means to deny or control religious pluralism in Turkey. By offering Sunni Muslim services at the site,

¹ Giles Fraser stated: "The Hagia Sophia was profaned by secularity in 1935. For secularism is not a way for all religions to share the public space peacefully; it is a systematic and deliberate attempt to drive God out of the public square." Quoted in Florian George Calian, "The Hagia Sophia and Turkey's Neo-Ottomanism," *The Armenian Weekly*, 24 March 2021. [Online](#).

² George Calian, "The Hagia Sophia and Turkey's Neo-Ottomanism." My emphasis.

³ Brian Croke, *Flashpoint Hagia Sophia* (Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁴ "Converting the Hagia Sophia: Turkey's President is Playing Religious Politics," *The Economist*, 11 July 2020. [Online](#).

⁵ Dimitar Bechev and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Competing Over Islam: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the Balkans," *Middle Eastern Institute*, 11 January 2022. Online.

critics claim it denies Christian use of the space, as well as other interpretations of Islam. As Senija Causevic writes, “Reprising its role as a mosque, [Hagia Sophia] has become a symbol of the modern Turkish nation where Turkish flags and the symbols of Sunni Islam are seen hand in hand.”⁶

In a similar vein, there has been no movement to make the Rotunda serve the Muslim population of Thessaloniki, despite a Muslim Albanian and Turkish presence there today. Given the site’s minaret is the only remaining one in the city, and one of the few within all of Greece, the Rotunda retains visible connections to Islamic heritage. If the Rotunda is meant to unite citizens, as curator Stamatis Chondrogiannis and Mayor of Thessaloniki Yiannis Boutaris both claimed, then does only permitting Christian use of the site in actuality make a larger claim about the religio-political character of the city, one less welcoming to religious pluralism?

However, it is important to note that Muslim residents of Thessaloniki have not vocally expressed a desire to have this kind of access to the Rotunda.⁷ Indeed, Osman

⁶ Senija Causevic, “Hagia Sophia: Turning This Turkish Treasure Into a Mosque is at Odds With its Unesco Status,” *The Conversation*, 29 July 2020. [Online](#). Causevic notes that other denominations of Islam, such as Alevism which makes up between 15–25% of the population, have been silenced and othered in Turkey. Hagia Sophia’s conversion further exacerbates these divisions.

⁷ According to Ifigeneia Kokkali, Albanians have looked to quietly integrate within Thessaloniki’s urban milieu. She refers to this situation as the “spatial invisibility” of Albanians (“Albanian Immigrants in the Greek City: Spatial ‘Invisibility’ and Identity Management as a Strategy of Adaptation,” in *Migration in the Southern Balkans: From Ottoman Territory to Globalized Nation States*, ed. Hans Vermeulen, Martin Baldwin-Edwards, and Riki van Boeschoten [Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015], 126). I therefore acknowledge how the treatment of ethnic minorities in Greece is an especially contentious issue. In Chapter 2, I examined the ways in which politicians used Thessaloniki’s incorporation into Greek borders as an opportunity to homogenize residents’ national, ethnic, and religious identity, and to de-Ottomanize while Hellenizing the urban landscape. The Greek-Turkish population of the 1920s further exacerbated the issue. The effects of these national shifts continue to permeate Greek consciousness today. As Michael Herzfeld notes, “The denial of the existence of ethnic minorities [...] has completed the picture of a country that is ethnically, linguistically, and confessionally homogenous” (“Spatial Cleansing: Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11:1/2 [2006]: 135–136).

However, the cultural-political mood of Thessaloniki may be changing. Though the city may be better described as a multicultural rather than an intercultural city (Chapter 4), under the former leadership of politicians like Mayor Boutaris, important strides have been made in acknowledging, celebrating, and

İsmailoğlu, the head of the Education and Culture Association of Muslims of Macedonia and Thrace, made clear that the Muslim community did not claim that the Rotunda should be used as a mosque.⁸ Rather than thinking of the Orthodox Christian use of the site as intentionally denying access to other religious communities, we should see the 1999 Ministry of Culture decision as a positive response to a need communicated by local community members. By permitting a hybrid Christian-secular use of the Rotunda, the state acknowledged that granting at least some religious access to the site could be a means to mediate dissonant heritage. At Hagia Sophia, on the other hand, there has been a shift in political priorities. While the secularization of Hagia Sophia at the beginning of the twentieth century may have been intended to circumvent the multiple religious claims to the sites, it effectively *prioritized secular Turkish citizens and their worldviews*. Today, those roles have been reversed, with Sunni Muslims gaining political and legal favor.

The conversion of secularized religious sites is political—inherently so. All religious claims are political claims. Understanding the deeply connected relationship between politics and religion provides helpful and necessary context for heritage dissonance. Finding solutions to address this dissonance continues to be a challenge

accommodating the religious and cultural diversity of the city. The Minister of Culture Aristides Baltas, when asked in an interview whether he would object to the Rotunda's function as a mosque, stated "I personally would have no objections" (προσωπικά δε θα είχα καμία αντίρρηση). In "«Δεν υπέγραψα ποτέ για την τοποθέτηση σταυρού στη Ροτόντα»!", *Karfitsa*, 16 January 2016. [Online](#).

⁸ İsmailoğlu clarified that the city's Muslim community asked, instead, for their own place for worship and burial in Thessaloniki. In Μαρίνα Καρπόζηλου, "Ροτόντα: Το πολυπολιτισμικό μνημείο που διχάζει τη Θεσσαλονίκη," *News 24/7*, 24 January 2016. [Online](#). According to the *Daily Sabah*, "Some 7,000 ethnic Turks are forced to worship in small apartments they converted into mosques and travel for hundreds of kilometers to bury their dead due to lack of a Muslim cemetery in the city." In "Thessaloniki's Turks Have No Place to Worship or Bury Their Dead," *Daily Sabah*, 30 May 2018. [Online](#).

because religion, heritage, and politics are so deeply interconnected. However, the *secularization of religious sites is also a political maneuver*. At least from a Western perspective, secularism—the separation of religion and governance—has long been seen as an answer to religious conflict, as a kind of politically neutralizing act.⁹ Scholars are right to acknowledge the ways in which ancient sites can be crucial loci for religious and political contestation.¹⁰ As the studies of the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia have revealed, however, the suggestion that the secularization of religious places can be a means for keeping the peace is misleading or even incorrect.¹¹

⁹ This idea emerged particularly in the wake of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, a movement that saw differences in religious doctrine lead to the creation of new religious communities, often through war and bloodshed. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan writes: “Religious freedom and the legal disestablishment of religion, as political ideas, find their origin in the early modern period in Europe. [...] For perhaps the first time since Constantine, religious affiliation in Europe began to be detached again from political identity.” Under this new order, religion “came to be understood as being private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed. Public, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted religion, on the other hand, was seen to be ‘false’” (8). Thus, a secular worldview looked “theologically and phenomenologically” *Protestant*, while “false” religion looked Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic. In *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 7, 8.

¹⁰ The Taliban’s March 2001 obliteration of two ancient Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan is another prime example. These rock sculptures, carved in sandstone cliffs in the third and fifth centuries C.E., loomed large at fifty-three and thirty-six meters tall. Though their destruction appears to be deeply embedded in iconoclastic rhetoric, Taliban commanders may have orchestrated the event in part as a reaction to the West’s deep concern for the preservation of these objects. UNESCO and New York City’s The Metropolitan Museum attempted to intervene, offering to “purchase” the Buddhas or pay for their preservation. This international reaction, according to art historian Finbarr Barry Flood, was interpreted by the Taliban as a veneration of cultural idols, or in other words, “a fetishistic privileging of inanimate icons at the expense of animate beings.” In “Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum,” *The Art Bulletin* 84:4 (2002): 653.

In some regards, a secular valuation of these statues was pitted against a religious one. Above all, this event, as with many conflicts over religious heritage sites, was a *political* maneuver, with the destruction of statues intended to send a very clear message to the West vis-à-vis their prioritization of historic objects over living people. Simultaneously, the *secular* valuation of the Bamiyan statues may have actually played a role in their destruction.

¹¹ For instance, a recent article on the city of Trabzon’s Hagia Sophia states: “Secularization plays a key role in distancing a nation, especially one with such a religiously-charged history, from its imperial past. It helps to *neutralize a space* as complex and multi-faceted as Hagia Sophia, whose history is bound within a number of religious turnovers.” In contrast, “the desecularization of spaces within Turkey is parallel to politically weaponizing them.” In “Whose Culture? The Curation and Management of World Heritage,” Harvard University Department of History of Art and Architecture, n.d. [Online](#).

As we have seen with the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, many (sometimes violent) conflicts over these sites took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, *after* their secular status had long been decided. Their secularization was a political tool that may have intended to resolve ownership and access disputes, but in effect added another layer of complexity to these disputes. Stakeholders today debate whether religion has any role at these heritage places *and* also ask which religion—Christianity or Islam—has a more legitimate claim to the site. The decision of Turkish president Kemal to convert Hagia Sophia into a museum did not allay conflict over the site. We should acknowledge the ways in which other factors—such as political changes or charismatic figures—play a powerful role in activating dissonance. Secularization, as a singular strategy of permanent conflict resolution, has failed.

I have demonstrated that the future of heritage requires management strategies that can cater to religious *and* secular uses in the same site.¹² This management should be more sensitive to the religious demands placed on historic sites, while ensuring that sites remain accessible to fairly wide audiences. Those changes in approach to site management will work to mediate dissonance and ensure a fairer, balanced treatment of different stakeholder communities. Though the use (and abuse) of religious heritage is inherently political, we must nevertheless find a means for navigating these complex situations. Framing and approaching the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as infrasecular geographies can help us reimagine how to think of authenticity and conflict over religious

¹² Though it is very difficult to determine with confidence whether there was an organic, on-the-ground support for this transformation, as many Turkish media outlets are pro-government platforms, we must nevertheless acknowledge that there was—and *continues to be*—a significant interest in using the site as a mosque again. The sheer number of praying visitors at the site since its conversion, for instance, is a testament to this relevance.

heritage. If we actively acknowledge and embrace the fluid cohabitation of religious and secular uses, forms of access, and identities, we can begin to visualize different forms of authenticity—in use and representation—that are not grounded in the language of originality and essence (“The Rotunda was originally a Roman temple and can only be preserved as such” or “Hagia Sophia was initially a Christian church and can only be presented in this way”). Doing so can also circumvent the issue of “freezing”—a criticism of the heritage and tourism industries explored in Chapter 3—in which the “true” or “authentic” layer of a historic site is identified and all later additions and transformations are removed. A hybrid approach reveals how the value of religious heritage sites exists *within* their palimpsestic layers—“the stuff in-between,” to use Veronica della Dora’s words.¹³

Authenticity encompasses *both* tangible and intangible aspects of heritage. Though I have mainly focused on tangible heritage—the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia as physical sites—I have also argued that the management and preservation of religious heritage ought to make more room for the intangible or nonphysical attributes of religious heritage, that is, the rituals, festive events, and traditions that inform religious engagements with these historic sites. By framing the use of religious heritage sites as a spectrum, we can envisage how different forms of engagements can coexist within the same hybrid space. This balance must be responsive to local demands while also addressing the priorities of the heritage industry and therefore will necessarily look different at each site. Of course, this approach requires compromise from diverse

¹³ Veronica della Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies: Making, Unmaking and Remaking Sacred Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42:1 (2018): 44–71.

stakeholder groups; that is, their ability to understand the advantages of different values coexisting within the same site. This can only be achieved through mutual dialogue and educational outreach.

Through a dynamic, negotiable balance of religious and heritage uses, we can aim to accommodate dissonance over religious heritage by *embracing* dissonant interpretations. This strategy, in my view, better captures what makes these religious heritage places so important to different stakeholders: Each individual has their own particular reading of what makes these sites sacred to them. If universally recognized heritage sites are intended to belong to all humankind, as UNESCO's World Heritage list suggests, then diverse stakeholders ought to be accommodated in these sites' management and preservation.¹⁴ Doing so allows us to reimagine the meaning and space given to religious places in the modern world.

Though the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia are currently loci for religious services that cater to one community in particular—Orthodox Christians in the case of the former, Sunni Muslims in the latter—I wish to pause here to consider whether these sites could accommodate more than one practicing religious group within the same space in the future. The multi-faith use of these sites is something that has been considered by scholars and public commentators. For instance, Florin George Calian writes, “Hagia

¹⁴ Of course, this reflection gets to larger questions regarding who gets to be a stakeholder (for instance, is each tourist a stakeholder?) and whether some stakeholders matter more than others (for instance, does geographical proximity matter?). In a way, President Erdoğan's decision to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque pushes against UNESCO's universalist claim. Whilst this conversion was not intended to prohibit access to non-Muslims, it was intended, in part, to affirm Turkey's sovereignty in deciding what happens to heritage sites on its territory, thus prioritizing Sunni Muslim Turks as stakeholders of the site.

Sophia could have dreamed to be all three in one: a mosque on Fridays, a church on Sundays and a secular museum during the week.”¹⁵

The possibility of having the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia serve multiple religious communities would certainly be a challenge. It would require particular adaptations to the buildings that would need to be easily made and unmade, such as the veiling or unveiling of mosaics, the addition or removal of Holy Tables, carpets, among a variety of other objects. But even more importantly, it would require communities that are receptive to such an intricate use of contested religious sites. This layered hybridity of place could be interpreted as a more authentic representation of these sites. It would better reflect the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia’s rich, complex histories, attested through their palimpsestic architecture *and* religious usage. Furthermore, this hybridity could aim to navigate and embrace the dissonance over the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, in effect making these sites monuments for unity, as curator Stamatis Chondrogiannis and Mayor Yiannis Boutaris had willed for the Rotunda’s dual use as a religious and heritage space. Of course, this coexistence also risks creating more conflict, expressed by stakeholders who consider religious sites as only able to serve one religious community. Though the residents of

¹⁵ Calian, “The Hagia Sophia and Turkey’s Neo-Ottomanism.” The Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska is a modern example of a multi-faith religious site. Three religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) coexist in the same space but in a different building: a synagogue, church, mosque, and interfaith center, spread across thirty-eight acres. It is intended to be a national model for interfaith learning and collaboration. Rabbi A. Brian Stoller comments, “It’s like a neighborhood. And each neighborhood lives in its own house and has its own values and belief system.” Quoted in Rheana Murray, “An Experiment in Unity: Jews, Christians and Muslims Mingle on Shared Campus,” *Today*, 20 October 2020. [Online](#).

Though it is still early to determine the long-term success or failure of Tri-Faith, it speaks to the value some stakeholders identify in not only holding cross-religious dialogue, but in actually enabling the religious practices of different communities in the same site (Berlin’s House of One is another example)—though, admittedly, *not in the same building*. Perhaps most importantly, this initiative was *intentionally created* to be a shared religious site. The Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, on the other hand, are heritage sites where controlling their identity and use have broader symbolic value for national and international politics and religion, and therefore their shared use would require reckoning with their complex, palimpsestic histories, for which there exists no clear precedence (as far as I am aware).

Thessaloniki and Istanbul are not likely to be ready for such a possibility anytime soon—as the current political climate of Greece and Turkey suggests—we can dream of its implications for the future of religious heritage management.

There are many different methods for addressing dissonance over religious heritage. Of utmost importance is the recognition of these heritage places *as religious heritage*, rather than as secularized sites whose use and significance are anchored in the past. If heritage refers to the contemporary use of the past, including its histories, memories, and imaginations, then we ought to embrace this contemporariness, both conceptually and in practice. We can do so by understanding the Rotunda and Hagia Sophia, and other religious heritage sites more broadly, as living places in which religion and religious practices are given space. Only then do we make places worth preserving.

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¹⁶ All material in the footnotes indicated as "Online" can be found in a separate section entitled "Online Media."

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