

# From museum to mosque: the repurposing of The Hagia Sophia



Britannica

## What is The Hagia Sophia?

The Hagia Sophia museum, officially known as the 'Great Mosque of Ayasofya' is a structure situated in Istanbul Turkey. This architectural marvel was built around 1500 years ago and has remained an essential part of Turkey's history and culture. The Hagia Sophia consists of a magnificent dome along with 4 minarets that overlooks the Sea of Marmara, its grandeur and colossal size has earned it the title of a UNESCO world heritage site.

## **What is the tumultuous history of The Hagia Sophia?**

The Hagia Sophia was originally built in the 6th century as an Orthodox Christian cathedral during the reign of Byzantine emperor Justinian I. The domed structure was decorated with intricate religious mosaics, fine marble pillars, and gilded frescos, although most of these have been damaged after the numerous changes the iconic building has been subject to. The Hagia Sophia was situated in the city of Constantinople (Istanbul) which was an essential location for the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, therefore in 1453 when the Ottoman Turks seized control of the area, much of the church was altered to their liking. Islam was the official religion of the Ottoman Empire; hence the church was converted into a mosque, completely altering its original design and architecture. Minarets were added on each side of the structure, Orthodox symbols were stripped off the walls and covered up with Islamic calligraphy - in fact, it remained Istanbul's most important mosque for years.

In total, the Hagia Sophia served as a church for 916 years and as a mosque for 481 years! In 1935 after Turkey was officially a free country, the Turkish president Atatürk transformed the building into a museum. It is a site of great historical importance and this conversion has been a symbol of 'peaceful religious coexistence.' As if the Hagia Sophia hasn't witnessed enough political upheaval and change of guard, the current Turkish president plans on reconverting it back into a mosque.

## **Why is it being reconverted into a mosque?**

The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has ordered the Hagia Sophia to be reclassified as a mosque. This transformation will take place on the 24th of July 2020 and will remain open to all visitors, regardless of their religious beliefs. On the same day of this announcement, the Turkish high court annulled the 1934 decree\* by ex-President Atatürk which enabled the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a museum. The reconversion of this iconic structure into a mosque was something Turkish Islamists had been hoping for, they believed that the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque wasn't a symbol of religious harmony but of losing itself to westernization. On this basis, observers have said that President Erdogan's plans to alter the Hagia Sophia are simply part of his political agenda to appease the Orthodox Turkish Muslims in hopes of receiving their undue political support. Erdogan suffered a major loss of face in 2019 after losing the municipal elections in Istanbul and this could be a clever means to obtain a loyal bloc of voters from the Muslim community. This strategy is known as vote-bank\*\* politics and is used by political leaders in numerous democratic countries.

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\*An official order from somebody in a position of power

\*\* A political strategy wherein a certain religious group/sect/cast is appeased simply for the sake of votes.



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