

Heritage Processes Between Democracy and Autocracy

Two Decisions on Hagia Sophia 86 Years Apart

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Die Umwandlung der großen Moschee Hagia Sophia in Istanbul in ein Museum im Jahr 1934 durch Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, den Gründer und ersten Präsidenten der Türkischen Republik, ist auch heute noch bedeutend für den Bruch der Assoziation mit der osmanischen Vergangenheit des Denkmals zugunsten einer neu geschaffenen Repräsentation der Republik. Rechtskonservative Kreise in der türkischen Gesellschaft betrachten diese Entscheidung jedoch als autokratisch und als Verstoß gegen den Willen und das Vermächtnis von Sultan Mehmed II., der Istanbul 1453 eroberte und das Gebäude von einer Kirche in eine Moschee umwandelte. Im Juli 2020 erklärte Recep Tayyip Erdoğan per Präsidialdekret die Umwidmung der Hagia Sophia zu einer Moschee. Diese Initiative wurde als Ausdruck seiner kompromisslosen Haltung gegenüber dem byzantinischen Erbe der Türkei gesehen. Ähnlich wie Atatürks Entscheidung von 1934 wurde auch Erdogans Vorgehen heftig kritisiert, weil es autokratisch und von einem revanchistischen Impuls getrieben war und seine politischen Ambitionen in den Vordergrund stellte.

Zwischen diesen beiden Entscheidungen liegen 86 Jahre, in denen die Türkei radikale politische und gesellschaftliche Veränderungen erlebte. Daher ist es wichtig, die Zeiträume, in denen diese Maßnahmen ergriffen wurden, zu kontextualisieren und die Ähnlichkeiten, Unterschiede und Beweggründe aus politischer, sozialer und denkmalpflegerischer Sicht zu vergleichen. Die Hagia Sophia, eines der bekanntesten und kulturell bedeutendsten Denkmäler der Türkei, stand immer wieder im Mittelpunkt der Diskussion über die Instrumentalisierung des kulturellen Erbes. In diesem Artikel werden die beiden Entscheidungen der Präsidenten unter den Gesichtspunkten der Instrumentalisierung des Kulturerbes und der Demokratisierung sowie der Wahrnehmungen der beiden Staatsoberhäupter in Bezug auf ihre Entscheidungen zur Hagia Sophia untersucht.

ABSTRACT

The conversion of the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque in Istanbul into a museum in 1934 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey, remains a significant initiative aimed at severing the association of the monument's Ottoman past from the newly established narrative of the Republic. However, conservative right-wing factions within Turkish society view this decision as autocratic and contrary to the will and legacy of Sultan Mehmed II, who conquered Istanbul in 1453 and transformed the building from a church into a mosque. In July 2020, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current president of Turkey, redesignated Hagia Sophia as a mosque by means of presidential decree. This initiative was seen as a reflection of his uncompromising attitude towards Turkey's Byzantine heritage (particularly concerning Hagia Sophia), which finds its roots back in the 1950s and in Erdoğan's own political career. Similar to Atatürk's 1934 decision, Erdoğan's action faced significant criticism for being autocratic, driven by a revanchist impulse, and prioritising his political ambitions.

These two decisions were separated by 86 years, during which Turkey experienced radical political and societal changes. Thus, it is essential to contextualise the periods in which these actions were taken and to compare the similarities, differences, and motivations behind them from political, social, and heritage management perspectives. Hagia Sophia, one of Turkey's most recognised and culturally significant monuments, has consistently been a focal point of discussion regarding the instrumentalisation of cultural heritage. This article will also examine both presidential decisions through the lenses of heritage instrumentalisation and democratisation, as well as the perceptions of these two leaders in relation to their choices regarding Hagia Sophia.

Introduction

The current Hagia Sophia was completed in 537 during the reign of Justinian I, following the destruction of its two predecessors as a result of two revolts in 404 and 532 CE.¹ Within this 1,500-year history, it has witnessed numerous significant historical events. These events impacted both the architecture and structure of the monument as well as its function.

Hagia Sophia was built as an Orthodox church and continued this function until 1453, with a short interruption in the 13th century. Constantinople witnessed the Latin Occupation from 1204 to 1261, during which the monument served as a Catholic cathedral. The next transformation of Hagia Sophia occurred in May 1453, with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. Shortly thereafter, the building was converted into a mosque. The endowment (waqf) established by Mehmed II provided resources for maintaining and repairing the monument throughout the centuries of Ottoman rule. In the 16th century, the exterior walls were reinforced with buttresses. The building underwent various repairs during the 17th and 18th centuries, with a comprehensive restoration carried out between 1847 and 1858.²

The establishment of the Republic of Turkey on 29 October 1923, had significant effects on cultural heritage in general and Hagia Sophia in particular. Some of the institutions responsible for the maintenance and repair of historical buildings during the Ottoman period were reformed and continued their functions, ensuring continuity in the preservation of historical structures.³ This contributed to the continuation of conservation efforts for Hagia Sophia, which underwent protection and repair work until, after functioning as a mosque for 481 years, it was converted into a museum in November 1934 by decree of Atatürk.⁴ Conservation efforts continued in the following decades, along with political discussions related to its function, which intensified after 2010. This culminated in another presidential decree on 10 July 2020 – this time issued by Erdoğan – who took the controversial decision to redesignate Hagia Sophia as a mosque.⁵

Hagia Sophia, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985 as part of Sultanahmet Archaeological Park, has a multi-layered and value-laden past. Its courageous and innovative architecture inspired many monuments throughout history, particularly the mosques built during the classical period of Ottoman architecture. It was referred to as the Great

Church in the Middle Ages and became the symbolic mosque of the Islamic World after the conquest of Constantinople. Its desacralisation and museification added another layer to its past and triggered long-lasting discussions in the conservative circles of Turkish society.

The Contexts of 1934 and 2020

This article examines the decisions made in 1934 and 2020 that led to a functional change in Hagia Sophia, analysing these events comparatively across contexts of political regime, society, international relations, and cultural heritage management. The evaluation focuses specifically on the fundamental frameworks of these contexts in their respective years.

After its establishment in 1923, Turkey adopted a parliamentary democracy, although it functioned under a single-party regime. Atatürk held office until his death in 1938, during which three prime ministers served. An attempt to transition to a multi-party system was made in 1930, but the opposition party created at that time functioned for only three months. Efforts to establish a multi-party system emerged again in 1945, but were only fully realised in 1950.⁶

Between 1950 and 2016, Turkey experienced four military coups, one of which was unsuccessful. The 1980 coup led to the dissolution of political parties and the imprisonment of their leaders. Civilian governance resumed with elections in 1983, and Turkey was governed by coalition governments until the *Justice and Development Party* (JDP) took sole control in 2002.⁷ Following a failed coup-attempt in 2016, the aftermath saw a transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017, abolishing the office of the prime minister, incapacitating the cabinet, and granting the president the authority to govern by decree.

According to the first census conducted after the establishment of the Republic, Turkey had a population of 13.5 million, of which 24% resided in urban areas. By 1934, the population had exceeded 16 million, although the urbanisation rate declined to 23%.⁸ In 1923, only 3% of the total population was enrolled in educational institutions, and the literacy rate was a mere 6%.⁹ However, after the 1928 *Alphabet Reform* and subsequent literacy campaigns, the literacy rate increased to 18% by 1934.¹⁰ The 1933 *University Reform* transformed *İstanbul Darülfünun*, an institution established during the

Ottoman Empire, into the modern *Istanbul University* – the country's only university at that time.¹¹

As of 2020, Turkey's population had reached 83 million, with 93% living in urban areas,¹² and the literacy rate had risen to 96%.¹³ The country was home to 129 public and 74 private universities.¹⁴ Since the JDP came to power in 2002, there have been nine changes in the position of Minister of National Education, six changes to the secondary school entrance system, and three changes to the university entrance system¹⁵ – all aimed at fostering a more religious and conservative society. Religious vocational schools made up 13% of all secondary schools,¹⁶ and the *The Century of Türkiye Educational Model* introduced in April 2024 significantly increased the emphasis on religious education in the curriculum.¹⁷

The global impact of the 1929 Great Depression affected Turkey, but the country pursued a distinct foreign policy through multilateral and bilateral diplomatic initiatives.¹⁸ Due to limited economic resources and a shortage of skilled professionals, Turkey was not a dominant player in international affairs. However, as the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, and considering its geopolitical location, Turkey maintained some influence in Middle Eastern politics.¹⁹

After World War II, Turkey took significant steps on the international stage, becoming a founding member of the *United Nations* in 1945 and joining NATO in 1952.²⁰ The close ties established with the United States through the Marshall Plan (1948–1949) laid the foundation for long-term strategic partnerships. Although Turkey began accession negotiations with the *European Union* in 2005, the process has effectively stalled over the past decade. In academic discourse, the evolution of Turkey's foreign policy in recent years is often described in terms such as „axis shift“ and „distancing from the West.“²¹

After the foundation of the Republic, some institutions inherited from the Ottoman era continued to operate, but the resources available for cultural heritage management remained limited. In 1931, during Atatürk's visit to Konya, directives were issued to enhance conservation efforts for cultural heritage. The establishment of the *Monuments Protection Commission* in 1933 marked a significant step toward a nationwide approach to heritage preservation.²² Despite these advancements, by 1934, Turkey had very few experts in cultural heritage management. In 1929, the budget for the *Istanbul Archaeological Museums*, which oversaw cultural assets under the

Ministry of National Education, funded only one specialist position each for the Byzantine, Roman, and Greek sections.²³

Turkey's active participation in international cultural heritage policies began with its founding membership of *UNESCO* in 1945. A significant milestone occurred in 1966 in higher education with the establishment of a heritage conservation program at the *Middle East Technical University*, followed by similar programs at *Istanbul Technical University* and *Yıldız Technical University* in the 1970s.²⁴ *ICOMOS' Turkish National Committee* was founded in 1974 by a bylaw, and the enactment of the *Law on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Assets* in 1983 created a more structured framework for heritage conservation. Turkey's relationship with UNESCO was further strengthened in 1985 when its first cultural site was inscribed on the *World Heritage List*. Since then, Turkey has served on the *UNESCO World Heritage Committee* for three terms: 1983–1989, 2013–2017, and 2023–2027.²⁵

Two Contexts, Two Decisions: Similarities, Differences, and Motivations

The decisions in 1934 and 2020, despite being made in different contexts, share a fundamental similarity: they utilise the country's most significant, symbolic, and value-laden monument for political purposes. Additionally, both decisions were made during periods of societal transformation. The 1934 decision came shortly after the radical transition from an empire to a republic, amidst intense social change. Similarly, leading up to 2020, the JDP increasingly revealed its societal agenda, particularly through education reforms that had been developing since the 2010s and intensified after the 2013 Gezi Protests.²⁶

Indoctrination through a new historical narrative and education system was another similarity that can be observed in both decisions. The *Turkish History Thesis* (THT), announced at the *First Turkish History Congress* in 1932 by the *Turkish Historical Society* (established by Atatürk in 1931 to conduct scientific research on Turkish history), aimed to create a new society through a novel educational doctrine. As an ethno-historical theory, THT encouraged Turkish society, under the guidance of the ruling cadre, to seek its roots in the Sumerians and Hittites, while bypassing the pre-Turkish and Christian history of Anatolia.²⁷ Despite various objections, the role of Ottoman history in THT had also diminished considerably.²⁸

The emphasis on religious values in education increased after 2010 as a result of modifications to the high school and university entrance systems, and particularly the reopening of lower grades of Imam Hatip schools (vocational schools to train government-employed religious personnel) in 2012. This shift was reflected in political discourse, especially in the rhetoric of Erdoğan. In February 2012, during a provincial chairmen's meeting of his party, Erdoğan stated, „They accuse me of dividing the country over religion, but I stand by my words. I said, ‚Our goal is to raise a devout generation.‘ I stand by these words.”²⁹

The JDP added a new layer to this indoctrination; a new cultural policy narrative. In 2018, the Director of Communications for the Presidency, Fahrettin Altun, shared on social media a photograph of a bookstore display on one of Istanbul's major pedestrian streets, writing, „Enough is enough! Has the time not come for a local and national cultural policy?”³⁰

The contrast between these two decisions reveals substantial distinctions between Atatürk's and Erdoğan's rhetoric and decision-making processes. Atatürk emphasised concepts such as „positive sciences,” „commitment to science,” „fine arts,” and „advanced civilisation” in his speech delivered for the tenth anniversary of the Republic, a year before the 1934 decision.³¹ Similar themes were echoed in the decision to convert Hagia Sophia into a museum. On the other hand, the JDP has increasingly adopted a Neo-Ottomanist discourse since 2009, using terms such as „ancestry,” „civilisation,” „conquest,” „resurrection,” „raising again,” „restoration,” and „New Turkey,” particularly in discussions involving Hagia Sophia.³²

The idea of converting Hagia Sophia into a museum can be traced back to 1931, when Thomas Whittemore, the director of the *Byzantine Institute of America*, initiated restoration work to uncover and preserve its mosaics (Fig. 1).³³ Subsequently, a commission was established in August 1934, chaired by Aziz Ogan, the then director of Istanbul Museums. This commission, composed of museum directors, experts, municipal and state representatives, and architects, prepared a report submitted to the *Ministry of National Education*.³⁴ Shortly thereafter, on 24 November 1934, a decree signed by members of the *Council of Ministers* and Atatürk officially converted Hagia Sophia into a museum.



Fig. 1: Scaffold in the narthex, The Mosaics of St. Sophia in Istanbul, Preliminary Report on the First Year's Work, 1931–1932, by Thomas Whittemore, Plate I.

Since hosting Habitat II (the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements) in Istanbul in 1996, Turkey has a rapidly growing, vibrant, and well-connected civil society that is struggling to manage and protect cultural heritage. In such a setting, the process that led to the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020 lacked involvement of experts, relevant institutions, and civil society organisations, which are key components of contemporary approaches to managing cultural heritage. Additionally, the process was accompanied

by two other developments: conversion of two other Hagia Sophias outside Istanbul, and a legal process concerning Istanbul's Hagia Sophia. The Hagia Sophia in Iznik, which had functioned as a museum since 1940, was converted into a mosque in 2011 after administrative and legal procedures that dated back to 1983. Similarly, the Hagia Sophia in Trabzon, which had served as a museum since 1964, became a mosque in 2013.³⁵ Thus, it is reasonable to argue that these precedents paved the way for the similar fate of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

While political debates surrounding the 1934 decision had been ongoing since the 1950s, a legal struggle for Istanbul's Hagia Sophia involving various lawsuits emerged after 2010. This culminated in a ruling by the *Council of State* on 10 July 2020, which removed all legal barriers to converting Hagia Sophia back into a mosque.³⁶

Actually, Erdoğan resisted pressure from his electoral base to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque during the second decade of his rule. At a rally on 16 March 2019, when supporters urged him to carry out the conversion, he pointed to a mosque located about 500 meters away from Hagia Sophia, responding, „First, fill up Sultanahmet Mosque, we won't fall for provocations.“³⁷ However, 15 months later, he changed his mind. Public opinion research indicated that his main motivation for this shift was to divert attention from the country's worsening economic conditions.³⁸ The presidential decree issued by Erdoğan provided no justification for this conversion, only noting the annulment of the 1934 decision and the transfer of Hagia Sophia to the *Directorate of Religious Affairs* (Fig. 2).³⁹

The motivations behind the 1934 decision can be inferred from the decree itself. The text explicitly states that the primary rationale for converting the mosque into a museum was its historical significance, asserting that „...the museum would bring joy to the Oriental world and provide humanity with a new institution of science.“ Furthermore, the decree addressed logistical aspects such as how restoration and maintenance costs would be covered, which institutions would be responsible for these efforts, and how surrounding urban development would be managed.⁴⁰ In this regard, the decree can be seen as an early attempt to establish a management plan for the monument.

Who Is a Democrat, and Who Is an Autocrat?

According to public opinion research conducted in October 2010, 69% of Turkish society believes that Atatürk's ideals are still valid today; Additionally, 75% feel that Atatürk was a democratic statesman.⁴¹ Although those percentages may have changed since 2010, it remains accurate (despite criticisms concerning the top-down imposition of social reforms) to assert that Atatürk is still perceived as an important leader figure for the majority of Turkish society.

Erdoğan continues to enjoy strong support from his voter base, despite facing various social and economic challenges in the country. A public opinion survey conducted in December 2022 revealed that 80% of those who voted for Erdoğan approved of his performance in office, while his overall approval rating among the general population was 45%.⁴² Erdoğan was subsequently re-elected as president in May 2023 with 52% of the vote. However, his style of governance has prompted more frequent comparisons to leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Javier Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump, all of whom have faced criticism for democratic backsliding and adopting more autocratic methods of governance.⁴³

It may be challenging to objectively compare the ways these two Turkish leaders governed and how they are perceived by society. In the case of Atatürk, we primarily rely on historical narratives, archival materials, and secondary sources to interpret the context of the 1930s. Conversely, Turkey is still governed by Erdoğan, which allows us to observe a trajectory of governance that has shifted from a relatively democratic system to an increasingly autocratic one. However, the similarities, differences, and motivations behind these two decisions provide ample data for a clear understanding of the contexts surrounding these choices and the positions of the two leaders.

In the 1930s, the preservation of cultural heritage was not a societal priority; instead, it was primarily considered by a narrow political elite. The absence of sufficient human resources and institutional frameworks for managing cultural heritage made it impractical to make decisions in an inclusive, expert-driven, and organised manner. Nonetheless, there were some efforts for consultative and participatory processes, such as establishing a commission or preparing reports by state institutions during the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum.

By 2020, Turkey had developed a significant level of scientific and professional expertise, along



Fig. 2: The curtains covering the mosaics on the apse semi-dome after the conversion into a mosque, Photo: Barış Altan, October 2024.

with institutional maturity, necessary to handle the complex and delicate nature of Hagia Sophia. However, it still lacked the democratic environment necessary for an open debate and public participation. Capitalising on this gap and strengthening his executive authority, Erdoğan was able to issue a decree to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque without any consultation.

The transition from an empire to a republic marked a significant shift, yet many societal characteristics remained unchanged and are still evident today. One notable aspect is the tendency to rally around a dominant leader. During the early republican era, this role was personified by Atatürk, who was honoured as the „Father of the Turks“ and the „Senior Teacher,“ a leader dedicated to both protecting and educating the nation.⁴⁴ Similarly, in recent years, Erdoğan has increasingly been referred to as

the „Leader of the Century“ and the „Leader of the Islamic World.“⁴⁵

Eldem argues that “there are few countries where the issue of cultural heritage has been constantly and systematically influenced by political concerns as in Turkey.”⁴⁶ This makes it challenging to answer the question, „Who is a democrat, and who is an autocrat?“, since nearly all power-holders in Turkey’s centennial history have instrumentalised cultural heritage. But, over the past two decades, we have observed intensification of this trend. If politicians and cultural heritage institutions in Turkey could reach a level of maturity that fosters discussion about „What should Hagia Sophia’s function be?“ and „How should this be managed?“ through democratic processes, beyond any doubt, it could contribute to the democratisation efforts of society as a whole.

Figures

- 1 Scaffold in the narthex, *The Mosaics of St. Sophia in Istanbul, Preliminary Report on the First Year's Work, 1931–1932*, by Thomas Whittemore, Plate I.
- 2 The curtains covering the mosaics on the apse semi-dome after the conversion into a mosque, Photo: Barış Altan, October 2024.

Endnotes

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