Hagia Sophia

Module 1: Descriptive Essays

Report Prompt:
The Hagia Sophia is an important monument from Byzantine time. Describe its original construction as a church, its conversion into a mosque, and its current use.

Text 1: Hagia Sophia: Facts and History
The Hagia Sophia, or “holy wisdom,” was originally built as a cathedral in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) in the sixth CE. Its construction began in 532 and was completed in 537.

Hagia Sophia has a classic basilican architectural plan which is typically rectangular. Its dimensions are huge for any church built at that time. It is about 82 meters long, 73 meters wide and 55 meters high. It has two floors with a giant dome in the center, along with smaller domes, above. The main dome is shaped like a shell or the inside of an umbrella, with ribs that extend from its top, down to its base. When the dome was placed on top of Hagia Sophia, its weight caused the walls to lean outward. This made the building unsafe. In order to rebuild the dome, the interior of the walls were first built, so that they supported the weight of the new dome. This enormous dome has later become the model for Byzantine architecture.

The building is currently a museum, and a UNESCO World Heritage site. A 1993 UNESCO mission to Turkey noted some problems with the building such as broken windows, falling plaster, dirty marble facings, damaged decorative paintings, and decayed lead roofing. Cleaning, roofing and restoration have since been undertaken; many recent visitors have found their view obstructed by huge scaffolding stretching up into the dome in the center of the building.


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Text 2: Hagia Sophia: A Spectacular Example of Architecture

Hagia Sophia or “Church of Divine Wisdom” was built by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the sixth century as a monument to Christianity and the rise of the eastern Roman Empire. Ayasofya (Turkish name) remained for centuries the biggest church in the world only being surpassed by the church of Saint Peter in Rome several centuries later.

Hagia Sophia was a spectacular example of architecture especially considering the limited building methods that were available at the time of its original construction. Only the best materials were used for building Hagia Sofia, including marble walls and flooring, and gold wall and ceiling...
decorations. The distinguishing feature of Hagia Sofia is the vast dome surrounded by several semi domes, designed to give the visitor an impression of the greatness of God.

An Earthquake caused a partial collapse of the dome soon after it was built in 558 CE. Over the centuries, it has been repaired several times. Even today there are ongoing repairs or restoration taking place.


Text 3: Hagia Sophia under the Ottomans

Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque under Sultan Mehmet after he took control of Istanbul from the Byzantines in 1453 CE and remained so for hundreds of years. During the Turkish period, several major alterations were made. Under the rule of the Ottomans, Hagia Sophia attained Islamic features, such as the mihrab, the minbar, and the four minarets outside.

The art works surrounding the mihrab include the best samples of Turkish pottery and calligraphy. The large calligraphy inscribed medallions, rounded plates of 7.50 m diameter, hung from the walls were inscribed on by Kazasker Mustafa Izzet Efendi, a famous Ottoman calligrapher. The names of Allah, Muhammed, Omer, Osman, Ali, Hasan, Ebu Bekir and Huseyin are inscribed there. On the sidewalls of the mihrab there are plates with the names of various Ottoman sultans written on them.

The tombs of Sultan Selim II and other Ottoman rulers, fountain of Sultan Mahmut I, library, Sultan Abdulmecit's meeting place and the mosque timekeeper's house can be found in the vicinity of the Hagia Sophia Museum. All of these, especially the tombs with their interior design, pottery and architecture, are excellent examples of the Ottoman traditions.

Source Text 4: Modern Turkey

Hagia Sophia was originally called Megale Ekklesia (Great Church). It was first built in the fourth century by Emperor Constantius on the foundation of a temple. However, the first church structure was destroyed around a century later, and a second church was built in 415 by Emperor Theodosius II. This second church was burned down in 532 CE, though parts of it had been retrieved and can be seen today. Hagia Sophia was rebuilt in its present form between 532 CE and 537 CE under the supervision of Emperor Justinian I. It is one of the greatest surviving examples of Byzantine architecture, rich with mosaics and marble and pillars.

Hagia Sophia remained a functioning church until 1453 CE, when Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror entered triumphantly into the city of Constantinople. He was amazed at the beauty of Hagia Sophia and immediately converted it into his mosque. It then served as the principal mosque of Istanbul for almost 500 years. It became a model for many of the Ottoman mosques of Istanbul such as the Blue Mosque, the Suleiman Mosque, the Shehzade Mosque and the Rustem Pasha Mosque.

In 1935 CE, under Turkish president Kemal Atatürk, Hagia Sofia was secularized and turned into the Hagia Sophia Museum. The prayer rugs were removed, revealing the marble beneath, but the mosaics remained largely plastered over, and the building fell into disrepair. Some of the calligraphic panels were moved to other mosques, but eight large circular panels were left and can still be seen today.