REPORT ON THE

2nd UNESCO Advisory mission to the World Heritage property

Historic Areas of Istanbul (Turkey)

29 January - 3 February 2021

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I would like to thank all the personalities who received me and who allowed me to carry out this three-day mission under excellent conditions.

I - Background to the mission

I undertook a second advisory mission to the World Heritage property Historic Areas of Istanbul from 29 January to 3 February 2021. This second advisory mission has received the agreement of the Turkish authorities as well as HE the Ambassador of the Permanent Delegation of Turkey to UNESCO. This report follows a first report, dated December 2020, following my mission to Hagia Sophia and Chora from 5 to 9 October 2020, undertaken at the request of UNESCO.

The second mission program involved updating information on Hagia Sophia and Chora (Kariye), two main monuments of the World Heritage property Historic Areas of Istanbul, which were converted into a Museum to Mosque by decision of the Turkish Authorities. The mission program included in-depth visits to the two sites and working meetings with key involved parties, including public officials, academics, ICOMOS, and representatives of the Orthodox Christian and Muslim faiths. I participated in working sessions with those responsible for cultural heritage at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism from Ankara and those present in Istanbul with His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the Consul General of Greece in Istanbul, as well as with the representatives of the ICOMOS national committee of Turkey (see list in Annex I).
The issue of the installation of lavatories near Hagia Sofia and the rehabilitation of the Madrasa were discussed at length during the meeting. Likewise, the state of Hagia Sophia, particularly concerning the movable panels covering certain mosaics (mentioned in the previous report), and those covering mosaics in Saint Saviour in Chora (Kariye), have been the subject of concern already expressed by ICOMOS Turkey. It was explained to me that lavatories are being installed in a building near Hagia Sophia that previously served as an office for team that worked on the restoration of the monument a few years ago. I was informed that this was not a recent construction, but an internal reorganization of existing offices, which are no longer in use. I was also told that the Madrasa adjoining Hagia Sophia is being rehabilitated to host a theological faculty pertaining to Fatih University.
Located northern-west of Hagia Sophia, the Madrasa sits on the same location as the original building by Sultan Mehmed II. According to the archives, the Madrasa was restored by the Fossati brothers by order of Sultan Abdülmecid. The original building did not survive, and an identical building was erected in the same location at the beginning of the 20th century. The current construction has been visited by the joint 2019 WHC/ICOMOS advisory mission and was the subject of a heritage impact study. According to ICOMOS Turkey, the lavatories could have been installed on the premises of the Madrasa itself. The current installation of the lavatories is an internal arrangement which has no impact on the Hagia Sophia monument. It does not raise significant concerns in ICOMOS’ view. What does worry ICOMOS is the absence of a comprehensive plan for the Hagia Sophia and its surroundings.

Turning to the issue of the large prayer rug and the ventilation of the marble pavement it covers, the ICOMOS representatives recommend that a systematic observation be carried out for the humidity level in the large prayer room. There appears to be a plan to relocate calligraphy panels to the monument's storerooms. The question of a visual impact and an alteration in the aesthetics of the monument could then arise.

Concerning Saint Saviour in Chora or Kariye, ICOMOS Turkey continues to regret the installation of the three panels intermittently covering the mosaics in the main hall. The main recommendation to suggest to the Authorities would be to consider the drafting of a Master Plan by Istanbul Survey and Monuments. In my opinion, it would be useful to associate ICOMOS Turkey with this Commission for advice.

2 - Field visit to the premises to house the lavatories and to the Madrasa rehabilitation works

It was important to visualize the work undertaken for the construction of lavatories near Hagia Sophia. The work was presented to us by representatives from the construction company in charge, together with the Turkish experts mentioned in Annex I to this report. As mentioned above, I was able to observe that this is not a new construction but rather work within an existing structure, formerly an office of the museum staff that was no longer in use.

The "construction of toilets" near Hagia Sophia has raised some concerns, as this was not presented to me during my first mission. I was able to visit the location on 29 January 2021. My observation in the field was that there was no new construction of lavatories in the northern-west part of the monument.
The renovation works of an old Madrasa (Religious School) attached to Hagia Sophia was also raised. This renovation work had already been ongoing and observed in the course of the 2019 joint WHC/ICOMOS advisory mission, as mentioned above during the meeting with the ICOMOS Turkey Committee. I was able to visit this site. The renovation is in its final phase, and I would advise leaving visible the remains of the foundations of the fountain that stood in the middle of the courtyard of the establishment, as well as those of the old column bases of the first building probably dating from the 15th century and destroyed at the beginning of the 20th century.
Upon my visit of the northern-west part of Hagia Sophia, I recommended not to leave scattered blocks from ancient structures, such as capitals, pieces of barrels of columns, remains of architraves etc. in front of the Madrasa building and the premises that will serve as lavatories,

Delivery of the works in this northern-west part of Hagia Sophia is scheduled for the end of 2021. Therefore, I recommended, in this regard, to study a development plan for what could be called an "Archaeological Garden" that would embellish this space. The southern part of Hagia Sophia, on the other hand, is of high quality with the alignment of very carefully maintained royal tombs. A similar effort should be made for the northern part of the monument in terms of landscaping.

3 - New visit to Hagia Sophia on 29 January 2021

Since my last mission in October 2020, the restoration work on the south walls of the great room under the vault of Hagia Sophia have ended and the scaffolding that protected the wall is no longer in place. This removal now makes it possible to appreciate the entire room and the figure of the Seraphim, now visible after its restoration.

Known as the Cherub, Seraphim means "one who burns" because of his proximity to the throne of God. They were four in number, depicted as guardians of the main image of Christ Pantocrator on the angles of the dome. Although the Italian restaurateurs, the Fossati, discovered them and made a copy of them in their notebooks, they remained for a long time with their faces covered. Their faces were covered with stars in 1609 during the reign of Ottoman Sultan Ahmed and remained so until 2009.

As a result of recent work, which was protected by extensive scaffolding due to the height of one of the figures of Seraphim at the North-East corner, the face was restored and remained uncovered. I was told that it will remain this way in the future and will not be covered up.
Figure of the Seraphin recently restored.

Left side of the main hall, previously covered by scaffolding.

With the scaffolding previously during the first mission (October 2020)

After removal of the scaffolding in February 2021.
Likewise, the restoration work on the paving of the upper gallery is now completed and I was able to observe onsite that all the slabs which were cracked have been repaired and that all the mosaic panels which decorate certain walls of this gallery are permanently visible.

![Flooring restored in the upper gallery.](image)

But this gallery is not yet open to visitors, pending a circulation plan to be studied and put in place.

**4 - Visit of Saint Saviour en Chora (Kariye) on 1 February 2021**

All the experts from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism were present during the visit of this second monument from the Byzantine period for which a decision to convert into a Mosque was taken in August 2020. I provided a detailed description of the changes made as part of the conversion of this monument into a mosque in the first mission report from 5- 9 October 2020. The changes I have observed since my last visit are as follows:
1. The site is completely fenced, and only accessible by technical staff. No more visits are allowed, and the site has not been opened for prayer.

2. Inside this monument, the Minbar (Imam's Chair for Friday Prayers) was removed, as were the prayer rugs, which were placed in a room adjacent to the main hall.
3. I was informed by the Turkish experts that a restoration program for the entire monument, estimated at 40 million Turkish lira will be launched and will last two years, according to Turkish experts.

As observed during my first mission, the same three mosaics (The Dormition of the Virgin Mary or Koimesis, Jesus Christ, The Virgin Mary with the child) are covered by three removable panels placed on the aisles of the apse and above the access door to the Naos. All other mosaics and frescoes that decorate the first hallway after the entrance, or exonarthex, as well as those in the second parallel hallway, or esonarthex, are visible and have not been covered (see photos).
Experts from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism confirmed there are no plans to cover all of the mosaic or fresco decorations that adorned this monument, except the three canvases already in place.

5 - Meeting with the Consul General of Greece in Istanbul on 2 February 2021

I was received at the headquarters of the Consulate General of Greece in Istanbul by Madame Georgina Soultanopoulou who helped me obtain an audience with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and who told me of her concern regarding the situation of the reconversion of the monuments Hagia Sophia and Chora. She informed me that all of her fellow consuls general in Istanbul viewed the decision taken in the summer of 2020 by the Turkish authorities, as unfriendly towards the Greek community in Istanbul. She expressed her gratitude to the Director-General of UNESCO, who sent twice a mission to Istanbul about the reconversion, which may have a negative impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of these two monuments, World Heritage of humanity.

6 - Audience at the seat of the Orthodox Patriarchate with His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomeo on 2 February 2021

His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomeo granted me a second audience in the presence of Professor Emeritus of the University of Geneva, Dr. Konstantinos Delikostantis. My first meeting with His Holiness took place during my first visit in October 2020. The Patriarch viewed with gratitude the role of UNESCO in the world and its interest in preserving the notable monuments such as Hagia Sophia and Chora. He reminded me that he had written to the highest authorities in Turkey to recall the important role of intercultural dialogue manifested in the Hagia Sophia monument and the image of tolerance it expresses.
He noted that, similarly, Chora has a tremendous symbolic value for the Christian community. It is a true artistic treasure whose preservation is vital for all the communities. His All Holiness gave me a number of his writings. These writings will be included in the file and kept by UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre.
III - Conclusion

From this brief presentation of the discussions and field visits, the following recommendations emerge:

A. For the fitting out of the lavatories and the conclusion of the Madrasa work, it is recommended to have a circulation plan drawn up between these two buildings and the entrance to the Hagia Sophia monument.

B. It is recommended to proceed with establishing an "Archaeological Garden" regrouping the archaeological pieces scattered in the northern area of Hagia Sophia.

C. Inside the large prayer hall of Hagia Sophia, specialists need to analyze the degree of humidity created by the carpet laid out in one piece. Regular ventilation of the carpet’s lower part is needed to avoid the development of microorganisms on the original floor tiles.

D. More generally, a "Master Plan" for the entire Hagia Sophia area would be beneficial for a long-term vision of this area.

E. The site of Saint Saviour in Chora (Kariye) is now the subject of a two-year large-scale conservation and enhancement project. Consequently, the implementation of the decision to convert it into a mosque has been delayed. It is recommended to take advantage of these two years for the organization of an International Seminar on "the conservation of mosaics and frescoes" in buildings from the Byzantine period.
IV – Overall conclusions of the two Advisory missions (2020-2021)

Further to the decisions of Turkey in July and August 2020 to turn Hagia Sophia and Chora into mosques, despite the fact that they were museums at the time of the inscription as integral components of the World Heritage property “Historic Areas of Istanbul”, two UNESCO Advisory missions were invited to the property (5 - 9 October 2020 and 29 January – 3 February 2021). The missions collected information relevant to the decision to change the status of the Hagia Sophia and Chora, and assessed any works done to both the interior and exterior of these components.

Access to the Hagia Sophia remains open to all visitors without any obligation to pay for a ticket, as was the case when it was previously a museum. The antique marble paving inside the prayer hall of Hagia Sophia is covered with a green/turquoise wool carpet. The colour of the carpet is quite striking and creates a contrast with the general aesthetic of this central part of the monument, and its placement may cause condensation below.

**Recommendation 1:**

*In the main prayer hall of Hagia Sophia, prayer rugs of more appropriate colours could be unrolled during prayers. Specialists need to analyze the degree of humidity created by the carpet laid out in one piece. Regular ventilation of the carpet’s lower part is needed to avoid the development of microorganisms on the original floor tiles.*

During prayer times, mosaic panels on the ground floor level depicting scenes of Christianity are covered by canvasses operated through electrical systems. The mosaics are made visible for visitors outside of prayer times. The electronically activated coverings of the mosaic panels do not touch the surface of the mosaics. The mosaic panels at the gallery level will not be covered.

There is no new construction of lavatories in the northern-west part of the Hagia Sophia. Lavatories are being installed in an existing building that previously served as an office for ongoing restoration works. The renovation works of the Madrasa attached to the Hagia Sophia are in its final phase.

**Recommendation 2:**

*For the fitting out of the lavatories and the conclusion of the Madrasa works, it is recommended to have a landscaping and circulation plan drawn up between these two buildings and the entrance to the Hagia Sophia monument.*

**Recommendation 3:**

*In the courtyard of the Madrasa, it is advised to leave visible the remains of the foundations of the fountain and the old column bases. It is also recommended to proceed with establishing an "Archaeological Garden" regrouping the archaeological pieces scattered in the northern-west area of Hagia Sophia.*
**Recommendation 4:**
A "Master Plan" for the entire Hagia Sophia area would be beneficial for a long-term vision of this area.

The site of Saint Saviour in Chora (Kariye) is now the subject of a two-year large-scale conservation and enhancement project during which it is not open for visitors. Consequently, the implementation of the decision to convert it into a mosque has been delayed.

**Recommendation 5:**
It is recommended to take advantage of the two-year conservation and enhancement project of the Chora for the organization of an International Seminar on "the conservation of mosaics and frescoes" in buildings from the Byzantine period.

Inside the Chora, arrangements to intermittently cover three mosaic panels during prayer times have already been completed in preparation for Muslim worship. The coverings are electronically controlled and made in colours that do not contrast with the aesthetic of the naos. All other mosaics and frescoes are visible and there are currently no plans to cover them. The ongoing conservation and restoration works of consolidating the frescoes and mosaics are executed with quality.

**Recommendation 6:**
The authorities may wish to consider drafting a “Master Plan” for the Chora area. It would be useful to associate ICOMOS Turkey with Istanbul Survey and Monuments for advice during the drafting of this plan.
ANNEX I: List of individuals met during the mission

Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Turkey:

- Mr. Emir Salim Yuksel, Deputy Director General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Mrs. Olcay Aydemir, Director of Istanbul Survey and Monuments.
- Mr. Emir Gökhân Bozkurtlar, Head of Department, Ministry of Culture and Tourism.
- Mrs. Kıvılcım Neşê Akdoğan, Department of World Heritage Sites, Ministry of Culture and Tourism.
- Mr. Özkan Keles, Architect, Representative of the Regional Directorate of Conservation Council N°4.
- Mr. Mustafa Turan, Site Manager of Historic Areas of Istanbul.
- Mrs. İpek Özbek, Urban Planner, Department of World Heritage Sites, Ministry of Culture and Tourism.
- Mrs. Hatice Kubra Yavuz, Historian, Director of Istanbul II Numbered Regional Renewal and Conservation Board.
- Mrs. Nelishan Ecem Oksal, Taksim Yapi Mimarlik Restorasyon.
- Mr. Hüseyin Bas, Restorer-Conservator, (Kariye)

Consulat Général de Grèce à Istanbul:

- Mrs. Georgina Soultanopoulou, Consul General of Greece in Istanbul.

Patriarchate of Orthodox Church in Istanbul

- His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeo.
- Professor Dr. Konstantinos Delikostantis, Emeritus professor at Geneva University.

ICOMOS national Committee, Turkey

- Professor Dr. Iclal Dinçer, President.
- Professor Dr. Zeynep Ahunbay, Former President of ICOMOS Turkey.
- Dr. Ege Yıldırım, Member of Board.
- Mrs. Burçin Altinsay, General Secretary.

**Turkish National Commission for UNESCO**

- Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zeynep Aktüre, Vice-President of Tangible Cultural Heritage Committee.
ANNEX II: List of documents received

Writings provided by His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew:

a. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew about Hagia Sophia, June 2020;


c. Letter to the Honorable Professor Emilia Guarnieri, President of the Rimini (Italy) Exhibition “The Space of Wisdom, The Hagia Sophia in Constantinople”, August 2007;

d. Common Declaration by Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew I, May 2014;

e. “Turkey’s Cultural Heritage Cudgel” Elizabeth H. Prodromou, June 2020;

f. International Environmental Symposia organized by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, September 2020;

g. Inter-Religious Dialogues organized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1977-2015;

h. Letter to Professor Mehmet Görmez, June 2016;

i. Correspondence in Greek on Hagia Sophia;

j. “Turkey takes Phanar Head’s words about Hagia Sophia as a threat to Muslims, July 2020.