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ETHNIC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN EARLY OTTOMAN ARCHITECTURE

In the study of architectural history, it is often a short leap from buildings to ideas. “The true significance . . . lies not so much in the physical character of its forms as in the ideas suggested by the forms,” writes Oleg Grabar in his examination of medieval Baghdad.1 His statement also expresses a currently popular approach to the study of Islamic monuments — that is to say, architecture is viewed as an expression of power.2

My own approach to architecture tends to be a bit more archaeological, concentrating on such pedantic details as the use of materials and workshop techniques. Certainly ideas can be more engaging than crumbling ruins, and modern theorists are often too bored with the actual bricks and mortar to read a technical report or a primary source. Instead, they focus their discourses on the history of scholarship and on the apocrypha of history. As my colleague Henry Maguire puts it, “While theorists are deconstructing their discourses, time and the elements are deconstructing the monuments.”3

Without a doubt, more fieldwork is necessary to document the vanishing heritage in the eastern Mediterranean and in the Near East: this, not interpretation, must be

Fig. 1. Istanbul. Hagia Sophia, from southeast.
the first task of the architectural historian. Obviously no monument can survive forever, but without a good record of its physical character, we may have no way to determine if our interpretations are valid. If we are correctly to identify the symbolic content or the historical message of a work of architecture, it is often best to start with the building. One must then penetrate the layers of historical accumulations and cultural constructs that constitute the “legend” of the work.

In a notable recent study, Gülru Necipoğlu does just this. She examines the development of an Islamic text and an Ottoman legend for the cultural appropriation of Hagia Sophia following the conquest of Constantinople, paralleling the physical transformation of the building with attitudes expressed by Ottoman writers. Borrowing from Byzantine accounts, Ottoman historical texts interwove history and myth to situate Hagia Sophia in an Ottoman present and to justify its conversion into a royal mosque. Thus, according to one version, when the half-dome of the apse collapsed on the night of the Prophet Muhammad’s birth, it could only be repaired with a mortar composed of sand from Mecca, water from the well of Zemzem, and the Prophet’s saliva. In addition, Muslim and Ottoman symbols were introduced into Hagia Sophia, including the minarets, minbar, and other mosque furnishings, as well as sacred relics and battle trophies (fig. 1). Yet a tension remained, and the Christian memory was never entirely erased: a firman of 1573 indicates that there was still some opposition to the preservation of a building built by non-Muslims.

Because of its continued prominence and the wealth of documentation assembled by Necipoğlu, we can witness the subtle symbolic transformation of Hagia Sophia as a new interpretative language was introduced. Consequently, we know what its Byzantine forms meant to the Ottoman beholder, and this also gives us a convenient starting point for interpreting the great domed mosques.