



THE MINBER IN THE BLUE MOSQUE

Hagia Sophia

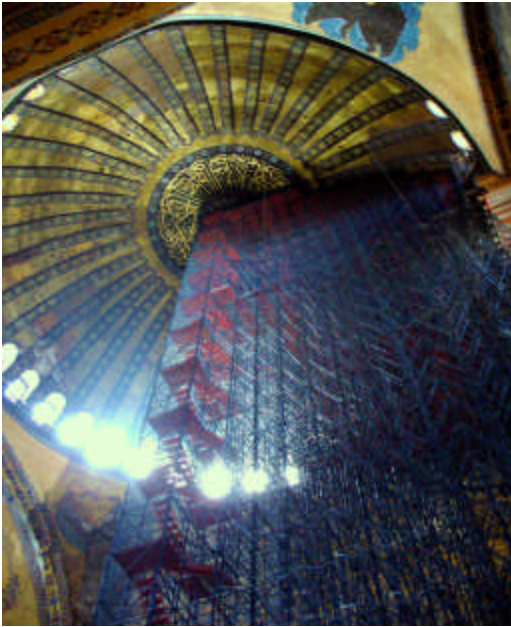
Having finished our tour of (and prayers at) the Blue Mosque, we again crossed back to the Hagia Sophia. It was like taking a trip in a time capsule. Originally called Megalo Ecclesia (Colossal or Mega Church) this earlier church was constructed some twelve and a half centuries before the Blue Mosque. Worthy of note is the fact that the second ecumenical council was held here in the year 381. As a church Hagia Sophia fell into disrepair numerous times, and had been rebuilt after two major fires (the first around the turn of the fifth century and the second in 532AD). It was the emperor Justinian who, thirty-nine days after this second fire, ordered the building of a new and larger church on this sight. This new church was completed in five years, and was reopened on December 27, 537. Justinian's structure, which is the one which stands today, has survived three major earthquakes: August 553, December 577 (which led to the eventual collapse of the main dome) and October 989. The church of Justinian is adorned with the remains of some of the most magnificent mosaics from the first quarter of Christian history. Perhaps one of the best know of these mosaics is the one over the door of the southwest vestibule opening into the interior narthex. The picture is of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child. To her right is the emperor Justinian holding a model of the Hagia Sophia, and to her left is the emperor Constantine holding a model of the city of Constantinople.

The height and sheer size of the narthex is almost unimaginable. The span under the dome is so great that it will accommodate the Statue of Liberty, from the tip of her torch to the bottom of her feet. The nave is said to hold as many as 10,000 people.

Muslim women and children sit in the back, in an area designated for them. It's not that Islamic women are considered inferior to men – to the contrary – they sit behind the men so as not to be a distraction to the men at prayer.

While I had visited small Islamic prayer centers in the US, this was my first experience inside a Mosque. One couldn't help but feeling dwarfed by the magnitude of this house of prayer – and this is probably as it was intended by the architect – we are reminded that as an individual we are mere specks in such a vast universe.

Before leaving the Blue Mosque, I stopped by one of immense pillars to pray – not aloud and prostrate as Moslems pray – but standing and mediating in my own Catholic tradition. In a sense I found myself feeling like a fresh-water fish who had found himself thrown into a salt-water sea. But water is water, and I began to swim. In this moment of silent serenity, I could not help but feel the presence of the divine.



THE DOME OF THE HAGIA SOPHIA

The span under the dome is so great that it will accommodate the Statue of Liberty, from the tip of her torch to the bottom of her feet.



MIHRAP IN THE HAGIA SOPHIA

The *mihrap* is a niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca. While still a Church the altar faced Jerusalem, indicated by the blue stained glass window. In Istanbul the mihrap is eight degrees to the right of facing Jerusalem.

INSIDE THE HAGIA SOPHIA CHRISTIAN MOSAICS AND THE ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY STAND SIDE



MOSIAC OF MARY HOLDING THE CHRIST CHILD

On her right is the emperor Constantine presenting her with the City and on her left is Justinian handing her the church.



PANEL CONTAINING INSCRIPTIONS

In Arabic, among others, are the inscriptions of the names of Allah and Mohammed.

On May 29, 1453 the city of Istanbul (as it was now called) fell to the invading Ottoman's under the leadership of Sultan Mehmed II. At this time Hagia Sophia was again in rather sad state. The Sultan then gave two orders that modern-day westerners have often misunderstood. First, he ordered that this magnificent place of worship be cleaned up and repaired. The Hagia Sophia and one other church, the Chora (which we were to visit much later in our trip) were turned into Mosques. The second command of the Sultan to his officers was that the people of the city were not to be mistreated. Rather they should return to their homes (many had come and laid prostrate before the Sultan, fearing for their lives) in peace and safety.

Icons and pictures are not permitted in a Mosque, however the Ottomans did not destroy the delicate mosaics, but instead whitewashed over them. Over the years calligraphic inscriptions from the Koran were added, and other efforts at the renovation of this ancient edifice took place.

The original Christian Church (as was customary of all early Christian Churches) faced Jerusalem. Muslims face Mecca when they pray. When the *mihrap* was added in the sanctuary behind where the altar had once stood, it was placed eight degrees to the right of center, the direction of Mecca. The other modification to the interior of the old church was the addition of the *minber* from which the Imam could address the people. Over time a total of four minarets were added to the exterior of the church.

In the mid 1930's the Turkish government announced that the Hagia Sophia would be turned into a museum. The whitewash plaster over the ancient mosaics was carefully removed, and today Christian mosaics and the Arabic calligraphy stand side by side inside this magnificent structure. I could not help but reflect on the symbolism of these two vastly different artistic styles – standing peacefully side by side in the solemn serenity of this ancient sanctuary.

The Cistern

Maintaining a constant water supply is of major concern to any major city (as those of us living in San Antonio well know). Under the reign of Constantine an underground cistern (originally called the *Basilica Cistern* because of its close proximity to the Hagia Sophia) was constructed.



HEAD OF MEDUSA

Under the reign of Justinian (a little over two centuries later) the cistern was restored and enlarged. Measuring 452 feet by 213 feet, the roof of the cistern is supported by 336 columns. At the far end of the cistern two of the base stones for the columns have carvings of the Greek goddess Medusa. One of the stones is upside down, and the other is on its side. According to some local folklore, the early Christians of Constantinople wanted to be sure that the pagan gods and goddesses were forever buried.

Therefore Medusa was placed upside down and beneath the base of one of the massive structural columns so that, when the water filled the cistern, she was below the water's surface – as if to give the goddess a permanent burial place beneath the seas. I think that perhaps there is a more practical explanation of how these stone carvings came to be at the base of the columns. Being pragmatic, these stone were the right size for the purpose. So why get new two-to-three ton stones from a quarry several hundred miles away when “used, discarded” stones were available locally? If it was the intent to drown and bury the memories of Medusa, such attempts have been a failure as these two stone bases are as much a tourist attraction as is the nearby museum from which the cistern derives its name.

The Jewish Museum

Around two in the afternoon (the customary time for Turks to have lunch) we entered a nearby traditional restaurant, and enjoyed a traditional Turkish meal, and chatted about the morning's not-so-traditional experiences. Then it was back into the mini-bus, which whisked us through the winding, hilly terrain of the city, squeezed between buildings on the narrow streets, and finally came to stop at a place known only to our tour guide. Upon debarking we walked up another street too narrow for our vehicle, crossed through some archways, down some steps (this was beginning to feel like a hike in the urban alps) where we found ourselves entering another former-place-of-worship museum. Until recently active, this synagogue commemorates the 500th anniversary of Jewish immigration to Turkey from Spain. Today only about twenty thousand Jews remain in Turkey, and the numbers are dwindling as the contemporary generation of Jewish youth leave Turkey for a college education and then remain elsewhere where more lucrative futures await them.



SCROLLS FROM JEWISH MUSEUM

The Museum contains many detailed stories about Jewish persecutions and the attempts of these descendents of Abraham to find safe haven. Once again my mind was being bombarded with historical facts (this time about the plight of the Jews in this geographical region) generally not known by westerners. The dept of my own ignorance about Jewish history, Turkish and Ottoman history, and Islamic history was beginning to overwhelm me – and we had not yet completed the first full day of our trip.

And We Took Flight

At about 6:30 we arrived at a restaurant not far from the Istanbul airport, teased our pallets with traditional Turkish food and enjoyed the fellowship of our travel companions. Then it was off to the airport for a late-night flight to Antalya on the Mediterranean Sea on what was to be the first of five flights (and one bus ride) in six days.

Antalya

In the Footsteps of St. Paul ... St. John ... and the Virgin Mary



SUNRISE OVER MEDITERRAEAN

Having arrived in Antalya at 11:00 the night before, it was after midnight by the time we got settled in our rooms, and 5:30 came quickly. The magnificent morning sunrise over the Mediterranean made the early wake-up-call all worthwhile. As you might have already guess, it was not yet 8:00 when we had finished breakfast and were back on board another mini-bus to continue our travels over the ancient roads of the area. While the roads were ancient, I took comfort in the thought that at least our mode of transportation was not. For the next

two days we would be visiting those sights I had most anticipated...Perge...the house of the Virgin Mary...Ephesus...and St. John's Basilica.

First stop – *Garden of Tranquility*

Our first stop was to a group of buildings that were anything but ancient. While it is referred to as the garden of tranquility, only the later part of the description is accurate.



INSIDE THE SYNAGOGUE

The small complex of buildings we entered glistened with the white masonry of contemporary architecture, set in the midst of the Turkish dessert. It reminded me of the whitewashed missions of Arizona and southern California. Yet, in a sense, these were modern missions – three structures standing for the mission of peaceful coexistence. There was a Synagogue, and Church, and a Mosque. And each of the modern edifices was rooted in a history as ancient as the first Biblical prophet of monotheism, Abraham.

The majority of our group was interested in the artistic designs of the synagogue and the mosque (we were all too familiar with a “church”).

Inside the Synagogue, one of the Jewish members of our travel group explained the five lines of Hebrew on each of the walls that flanked the Star of David. She informed us that each line was the first words of one of the Ten Commandments. Jokingly I asked her if that meant that all ten lines said “thou shalt not.....”

The small Mosque in the complex was a striking contrast to enormous edifices we had visited the day before. The mihrap, which faced the city of Mecca, was hardly larger than an average door, and the minber stood at the apex of a small series of steps, only some six