



Monday July 13th 2020

As President of the International Association of Byzantine Studies and on behalf of all members of the Association as well as the wider scholarly community I write to condemn in the strongest terms the recent decision of the Turkish Council of State and of the President of the Turkish Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to return the Ayasofya Museum to its former status of a mosque. This action, along with a number of similar actions undertaken by the Turkish government in respect of Byzantine religious buildings in several cities, and for motives based entirely on political opportunism, is deeply to be regretted. It directly contravenes UNESCO regulations to which the Turkish Republic has long been committed in respect of the management and conservation of cultural heritage. It unnecessarily inflames public opinion both within and outside Turkey, damaging Turkey's international standing as well as its well-earned reputation for respecting historical cultures. It directly impacts the ability of both Turkish and non-Turkish scholars to study important artifacts that form an integral aspect of Turkey's past and have made a significant contribution to its present. It also damages Turkish scholarship and research in both the humanities as well as the natural sciences in a way that is likely to have direct consequences for Turkish participation in international scientific enquiry for some years to come.

Turkey is home to many historical cultures, each of which plays its part in its modern identity, each of which contributes to the multi-faceted and dynamic culture of Turkey and the Turkish people. It is important, therefore, to value each of these elements for their own sake and to be willing to recognize their varying contributions to the whole. This is a strength, not a weakness – variety is a crucial ingredient in any lively and dynamic culture.

From early Anatolian cultures and the Hittites down to the Hellenistic kingdoms, the Roman and Byzantine empires, the Seljuks and Ottomans, all have left traces and made contributions to the landscape, cultures and civilisations of Turkey. Damaging one damages all. Changing the status of the Hagia Sophia is a retrograde step that will hinder a clear vision and better understanding of Turkey's past, something obviously appreciated and understood by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, but which is sadly lost on the current political leadership. If we have learned anything from the experiences of the last eight decades since the conclusion of the Second World War, it is that attempting to expunge or rewrite the past by manipulating the historical record has always proved both short-lived and counter-productive. It harms the society and culture upon which it is imposed, and it can take generations to overcome, with all the negative consequences attached to such a process.

The Turkish government and its leadership should take notice of the international reaction to their short-sighted and ignorant gesture. Their actions can only harm their own interests and those of the people they aspire to represent.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John F. Haldon", with a long, sweeping underline.

John F. Haldon

President, International Association of Byzantine Studies
History Department, Princeton University