

# The Great Church of Constantinople: History, Architecture and Liturgical Challenges

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This presentation is a humble offering to the communities of New Skete and to all who have gathered here. Today 40 years of Christian witness are being remembered. The lives of both the living and departed have brought us together. Lives immersed in prayer, work and study have witnessed and now witness to the need for all to be one with God and each other.

## I: History

The basilica of Hagia Sophia built by emperor Justinian (527-65) follows two earlier structures of the same name located more or less on the same site. The first was completed and dedicated in 360 during the reign of Constantius. This church was greatly damaged by a fire most likely caused by arsonists protesting the banishment of St. John Chrysostom in 404.

The second Hagia Sophia built under emperor Theodosius II is rededicated in 415. This church building was again severely damaged by another fire during the NIKA riot of January 532.<sup>[1]</sup> Leading up to the riot were political i.e. dynastic, religious and social conflicts. During this time there were two rival factions each loyal to its own Christology. These factions also competed with each other in the events of the hippodrome and were known by their respective colors. Thus, those faithful to the Council of Chalcedon (451) were the Blues and those opposed to Chalcedon were known as the Greens. For a brief time Blues and Greens banded together forming a political bloc to oppose Justinian. As a result of this temporary alliance a rival emperor, Anastasius, is proclaimed. With this proclamation there ensues a riot made up of those rebelling against Justinian. The rioters fan out into the city using NIKA - VICTORY - as their rallying cry. During the course of the riot some of the "finest buildings and monuments of art were subjected to destruction and fire."<sup>[2]</sup> Among the ruined monuments was Hagia Sophia.

Justinian is eventually able to quell the riot due in large part to his loyal and capable General Belesarius. With his army Belesarius manages to rout the rioters into the hippodrome and proceeds to slaughter them. The death toll is somewhere about 30-40 thousand. Anastasius' reign abruptly ends with his execution.

The damage done to Hagia Sophia gave Justinian the pretext for erecting a new and "far more magnificent church."<sup>[3]</sup> With a work force of about 10 thousand, work on Justinian's church begins in 532. Five years later (537) construction is completed. Procopius, contemporary of Justinian and historian, offers this description of Hagia Sophia some 20 years after its completion:

"The whole ceiling is overlaid with pure gold which is beautiful as well as ostentatious. Yet the reflections from the marbles prevail, vying with the gold... Who could recount [their] beauty? One might imagine that one had chanced upon a meadow in full bloom. For one would surely marvel at the purple hue of some, the green of others, at those which glow with crimson and those which flash with white, and again at those which nature, like a painter has varied with the most contrasting colors."<sup>[4]</sup>

In 558 an earthquake caused part of the main dome to collapse. The re-construction and re-dedication occurred 5 years later. There are varying dates for the re-dedication. Some use 24 December 563 – the beginning of the Nativity/Theophany cycle while others point to 6 January

564. Regardless of the date, we have what is one of the most important primary sources made available by Paulus Silentiarius whose Ekphrasis read at the re-dedication provides a description of the interior which draws us into the magnificent space of the Great Church.<sup>[5]</sup>

## II: Structure/Architecture

To appreciate the architecture of Justinian's Hagia Sophia we need to look at, if only briefly, its architectural antecedents in Constantinople. Two examples of church architecture pre-dating Hagia Sophia are the church of St John the Baptist, often referred to as Studios<sup>[6]</sup>, and the church of the Mother of God in Chalkoprateia.<sup>[7]</sup> The latter became renowned for keeping the zonē or cincture of the Virgin. By the 9th century all Marian liturgical celebrations either began or ended at the Chalkoprateia. This church also dates from the 5th century but, without question, Studios is the older and better preserved of the two.<sup>[8]</sup>

From 1907-1909 the Russian Archaeological Institute did a survey of Studios. This expedition is responsible for uncovering the marble pavement and the excavation of a cruciform crypt under the altar. The crypt probably held the relics of the monastery. Thanks to the work of archaeologists and architects the existing fragments of the sanctuary have provided us with the earliest sanctuary plan in Constantinople. This means that prior to the building of Justinian's Hagia Sophia the π shaped altar partition was in use. This partition, prominent in Constantinople, has its own history of development.

The first stage begins with what is commonly referred to as the templon. Its origin can be traced to the waist high partition that helped to "set off" and protect the emperor and his retinue from the surrounding crowds. Excellent examples of the imperial templon can be seen in the *bas relief* on the base of the obelisk of Theodosius in the hippodrome in Istanbul.<sup>[9]</sup> This protective structure was eventually incorporated into the partition that would occupy a prominent place in the churches of Constantinople including Justinian's Hagia Sophia.

As a prominent feature of the churches in Constantinople, the templon of the π shaped partition connects interspersed columns at the bottom while the tops of the columns are joined by an architrave. That the π shaped partition predates Justinian's church shows that the arrangement of liturgical space in Hagia Sophia was overall in harmony with earlier churches. From this perspective, Hagia Sophia was quite "traditional" as far as its space was divided into narthex, nave and altar area.

While we cannot compare and contrast every detail of liturgical space and furnishings found in Hagia Sophia<sup>[10]</sup> with earlier Constantinopolitan churches we can safely say that the most unique feature of Justinian's basilica is its immense size.<sup>[11]</sup> The large and opened space coupled with the presence of the bishop of the Constantinople, the emperor and the imperial senate organically contributed to the complexity and length of the liturgical rites.

To maintain the huge structure and its liturgical cycle Justinian ordered that a large enough staff be assigned to Hagia Sophia. During his reign 60 presbyters, 140 deacons (40 were women), 90 subdeacons, 110 readers, 25 chanters and at least 100 ostiarii (doorkeepers) were needed for the Great Church to properly function.<sup>[12]</sup>

Mention has already been made of Paulus Silentiarius. He is our primary source for knowing what the arrangement of space and liturgy was like in Hagia Sophia. In his Ekphrasis, a poem of about 1,027 lines written in iambic hexameter<sup>[13]</sup> we are aided in allowing our imaginations to enter the sacred space of Hagia Sophia.

" ...there is a separate space for the bloodless sacrifice,  
not of ivory or portions of cut stones or appointed copper,

but this space is entirely surrounded by quarried silver  
and in this space covered by silver are the initiates  
distinguished from the harmonious voices of the crowd.

Naked silver is also cast upon the floor, and the pillars also are  
entirely of silver, twice six these pillars are ablaze giving light  
to those afar.

[Above the pillars] are dazzling disks beautifully hand crafted works  
of art. In the midst of one is shown the undefiled one of God,  
the unsown image clothed in the form of a mortal being.  
Outside [the disk] an army of well plumed angels bending their necks  
(for no one can see the veiled majesty hidden from men) . . .

Elsewhere on adorned metal [are] the prior proclaimers (i.e. the prophets) of the  
paths of God, before he was to take on flesh, who form a sacred voice singing in  
all directions announcing the enthroning of Christ . . .

Also visible in art are those of lowly walks of life,  
those who were wicked minded and who committed wicked deeds  
who later witnessed to and announced the king of heaven.  
Fishermen catching men, fishermen skilled in dragging the beautiful net  
bursting with immortal life.

The mother of Christ is [also] skillfully portrayed,  
holder of ever flowing light, who at one time labored  
nourishing the holy one in the hollow bosom of her womb.

And above the many shaped capitals (i.e. in the architrave) are engraved  
the names of the reigning queen and king."<sup>[14]</sup>

Paulus Silentarius goes on to describe a carved cross – presumably in the architrave. Also,  
there is mention of the three sides of the partition separating altar and nave. Each side of the π  
shaped partition had its own entryway. Within the enclosure was an altar of pure gold over which  
was a ciborium- an indescribable tower, raised on fourfold arches of silver."<sup>[15]</sup>

### III: Liturgical Challenges

Liturgy is the living expression of celebrating and proclaiming the Good News made possible by  
the Lord's new and everlasting covenant. In the sharing of the one bread and cup, the Kingdom of  
God which is to come is being revealed and made present here and now. Put another way, the  
place of worship – particularly the open space within Hagia Sophia – draws the Christian  
community into the mystery of the transcendent God who reveals himself here and now. Here the  
term mystery must recover its fuller meaning. For many, if not most, mystery is equated with the  
hidden or unknown. What is often bypassed or forgotten is that mystery in association with the  
sacramental and liturgical life of the Church reveals what is hidden and draws the community into  
the unknown. The primary function of mystery is to reveal and not to conceal.

Hagia Sophia and its Constantinopolitan antecedents are the architectural proclamations of the  
ever-present 8<sup>th</sup> day. In other terms, the Lord's three day Pascha is not an event trapped in the  
past. Neither is it an annual event nor a weekly event that is regulated by the Typikon. The Lord's  
three day Pascha is an ever-present event which, for all intents and purposes, has been  
marginalized. During the Church's historical sojourn mental, psychological and spiritual shifts in  
the understanding and celebration of the Liturgy have helped to alter the experience of mystery

into that which conceals. Liturgically, the mystery of the Kingdom devolved into a closed and hidden reality.

What helped to change the focus away from God's inaugurated Kingdom to a Kingdom spatially and temporally distant from the here and now is the very late development of the solid iconostasis.<sup>[16]</sup> In its Byzantine and Russian form, the iconostasis both expressed and contributed to a piety and spirituality that ultimately divided and polarized matter/spirit, body/soul, time/eternity, earth/heaven, prayer/sacrament, clergy/laity, male/female, God/humanity.

For the communities of New Skete to install an altar partition based on those existing in Constantinople signals a return to liturgical worship as **the most comprehensive venue** for proclaiming and revealing the mystery of the Kingdom of heaven. St. Maximus the Confessor offers keen insights into this fundamental aspect of liturgical worship. In his *Mystagogia*, St. Maximus shows that, among other interpretations, the church building is an expression of diversity in unity and unity in diversity of the cosmos. As a Constantinopolitan he knew Justinian's Great Church and the older churches utilized space to reveal rather than conceal the age to come. One can sense St. Maximus turning to the Council of Chalcedon and its defense of the divine and human natures of Christ being united in one person yet "without confusion, without change, without division and without separation. This basic definition of Chalcedon together with the council's incorporation of the Tome of St. Leo of Rome, which maintained the uniqueness and interpenetration (perichoresis) of each nature is an important key to understanding the *Mystagogia*. It allowed St. Maximus to speak about the uniqueness of altar and nave as well as their mutual interpenetration or exchanging of properties. Unity and diversity co-exist in the context of the renewed and transfigured cosmos.

"... one house in its construction...admits of a certain diversity in the disposition of its plan by being divided into an area exclusively assigned to priests and ministers, which we call a sanctuary, and one accessible to all the faithful, which we call a nave. Still, it is one in its basic reality without being divided into its parts by reason of the differences between them, but rather by their relationship to the unity, it frees these parts from the difference arising from their names. It shows to each other in turn what each one is for itself. Thus, the nave is the sanctuary in potency by being consecrated by the relationship of the sacrament [i.e. mystagogia] towards its end, and in turn the sanctuary is the nave in act by possessing the principle of its own sacrament, which remains one and the same in its two parts."<sup>[17]</sup>

Justinian's Great Church and New Skete's Church of the Holy Wisdom teach us that the past has much to offer the present. Most likely we will not see again a church like Hagia Sophia. Yet here in the Taconic Mountains of New York State there is a temple where liturgical space once again overcomes all divisions and polarities brought on by sin.

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<sup>[1]</sup>The NIKA riot begins in the hippodrome located opposite Hagia Sophia. It was in the hippodrome where public opinion could be freely expressed and sometimes even impacted the government. Cf. A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, vol. 1, p 155.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Ibid.*, p 157.

<sup>[3]</sup> Rowland J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia*, p.9.

<sup>[4]</sup> *De Aedificiis*, PG 87. Cf. Mainstone p.10.

<sup>[5]</sup> During succeeding years there were other partial collapses of the dome requiring restoration. These restorations included rebuilding the north and south walls which involved adding buttresses to the exterior. These exterior changes affected the interior lighting of the basilica.

<sup>[6]</sup> Studios was a senator who had the church of St. John built cir. 463. By the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Studite monastery, under the guidance of its abbot St. Theodore, became a major center of monastic and liturgical reform. Cf. Robert F. Taft, S.J., *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History*, Collegeville, 1992, pp.52-66.

<sup>[7]</sup> Chalkoprateia is the Greek term referring to the Copper Market.

<sup>[8]</sup> For an introduction to the architecture of these two churches see Thomas F Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople, Architecture and Liturgy*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980, pp.11-41.

<sup>[9]</sup> See Maria Chermetteff, "The Transformation of the Russian Sanctuary Barrier and the Role of Theophanes the Greek," *The Millennium: Christianity and Russia 988-1988*, New York, 1990, p.108.

<sup>[10]</sup> Cf. George P. Majeska, *Notes on the Archeology of St. Sophia At Constantinople: The Green Marble Bands On The Floor*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 32, 1978, pp.299-308 and *St. Sophia In The Fourteenth And Fifteenth Centuries: The Russian Travelers On The Relics*, *DOP*, no. 27, 1973, pp.71-87.

<sup>[11]</sup> Approximately 300 Byzantine feet long by 250 Byzantine feet wide. 31 meters =100 Byzantine feet.

<sup>[12]</sup> Mainstone p.229.

<sup>[13]</sup> See Ruth Macrides and Paul Magdalino, *The Architecture of Ekphrasis: Construction and Contest of Paul The Silentiary's Poem on Hagia Sophia*, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 1988, vol.12, pp. 47-82.

<sup>[14]</sup> Lines 682-715. See also Cyril Mango, *The Art Of The Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, Englewood Cliffs, 1972, pp.80-96. Though Paulus refers to the engraved names of both queen and king, it should be remembered that Justinian's wife Theodora had been dead for about 15 years.

<sup>[15]</sup> Line 720, Mango p. 88.

<sup>[16]</sup> The multi-tiered Russian iconostasis achieved its final form by the 16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century. See Irina Zhuravieva, "The Forefathers Tier and the Completion of the Russian Iconostasis." *Ikonostas*, ed. Lidov, Moscow, (2000):pp.490-500. English Abstract, pp. 737-738.

<sup>[17]</sup> *Mystagogia*, trans. George Berthold, New York, 1985, chpt.2, p. 188.