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“Contesting the Byzantine Past: Four Hagia Sophias as Ideological Battlegrounds of Architectural Conservation in Turkey”

Historic monuments constantly evolve; being preserved, transformed or destroyed to meet the changing expectations of the present. As the remnants of diverse and often contested pasts, they trigger alternative ways of remembering in the everyday life of inhabitants. Museumification is one way to deal with these alternative ways of remembering. Through museumification, historic monuments are reconceptualised as objects possessing solely historic artistic value with less contemporary social or political relevance¹.

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic, museums played a significant role in not only distancing the secular nation-state from its imperial and Islamic Ottoman past, but also neutralising contested sites and adopting them into the official narratives of the early Republican ideology. One of the most debated acts of the Turkish authorities was the conversion of Hagia Sophia, the iconic church of former Constantinople that was functioning as a mosque, into a museum. Consequently, the museumification of Byzantine monuments became a widespread practice, which was succeeded by the opening of other converted Byzantine churches as museums.

In recent years, first Hagia Sophia in İznik and then in Trabzon were reopened as mosques after functioning as museums for decades. The repeated statements of Turkish authorities expressing their wish to see Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia as a mosque raise further concerns on its future as a museum. Meanwhile, Hagia Sophia in Vize, which had been left abandoned for many years, has already been reopened as a mosque without receiving much attention. The conversion of Hagia Sophias into mosques not only glorifies their Ottoman pasts but also vandalises these significant monuments by hasty, unqualified and even rudimentary restorations with extensive reconstructions.

The paper focuses on the recent transformations of these four Hagia Sophias in Turkey, which are regarded as ideological battlegrounds for Turkish authorities. Challenging the

¹ Ashworth, Gregory. “The conserved European city as cultural symbol: the meaning of the text.” In *Modern Europe: Place, Culture, Identity*, edited by Brian Graham (London: Arnold, 1998), 268.

most symbolic achievements of the secular Republic, these transformations are clear manifestations of the current political milieu, highlighting Islam as the major identity of Turkey. Moreover, they are part of a systematic vandalism of the Byzantine heritage by recent restoration approaches aiming to suppress alternative ways of remembering. Therefore, this paper discusses how the concept of 'restoration' is used as an instrument to legitimise vandalism of the Byzantine heritage in Turkey through the recent stories of four Hagia Sophias.