

Istanbul Revealed

Hagia Sophia



Introduction

Previewing this book?

Please [check out our enhanced preview](#), which offers a deeper look at this guidebook.

Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

A wonder of 6th century engineering, Istanbul's church of Hagia Sophia stood as a symbol of the Byzantine empire for over 900 years. So great is its magnetism that it was adopted by the conquering Ottomans and converted into a mosque to signal their rightful inheritance of the empire's distinguished legacy. And the magic remains on full display today: a massive dome that appears to float weightlessly above the floor, filtered light that infuses the interior with a glow symbolic of God's wisdom and gold-filled mosaics that encourage contemplation. It is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **An introduction.** We review the church's history and explain why the emperor-builder Justinian broke from earlier design precedent in favor of an innovative central plan that features a prayer space covered by an enormous dome.
- **Review of the architectural highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we profile the church's most important architectural features and offer a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Tour of the mosaics.** The church holds one of the greatest collections of mosaics in the world. To do it justice, we crafted a comprehensive tour that features eleven of the premier works. For each, we review its history, stylistic features and iconography.
- **A visit to the prototype.** Since the nearby church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus likely served as a small-scale prototype for the great church, we offer a tour that focuses on their shared characteristics.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Hagia Sophia's legacy and sets you on

a path to making your own discoveries.

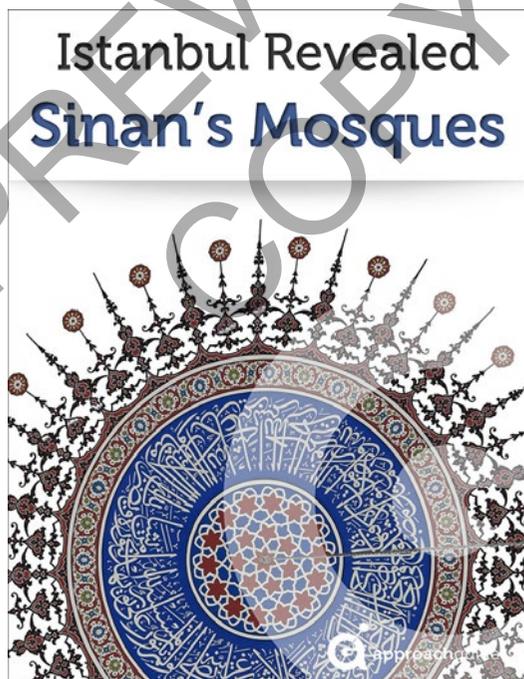
Enjoy your trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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Other Cultural Sites in Istanbul: Sinan's Mosques

Presiding over the Ottoman empire at the height of its power, sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (ruled 1520-1566) championed the construction of large Friday mosques throughout Istanbul. Mimar Sinan, the chief royal architect who was himself a convert to Islam, oversaw this building campaign, transforming the landscape of the capital city. Sinan's mosques — designed for sultans, royal family members and high-ranking government and military officials — are sublime works of art and architecture. They are yours to explore with our [Approach Guide to Sinan's mosques](#).



Get the Approach Guide to [Sinan's Mosques in Istanbul](#)

Istanbul Revealed: Hagia Sophia

Version 1.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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So the church has become a spectacle of marvellous beauty, overwhelming to those who see it, but to those who know it by hearsay altogether incredible. For it soars to a height to match the sky, and as if surging up from amongst the other buildings it stands on high and looks down upon the remainder of the city, adorning it ... And it exults in an indescribable beauty. Indeed one might say that its interior is not illuminated from without by the sun, but that the radiance comes into being within it, such an abundance of light bathes this shrine.

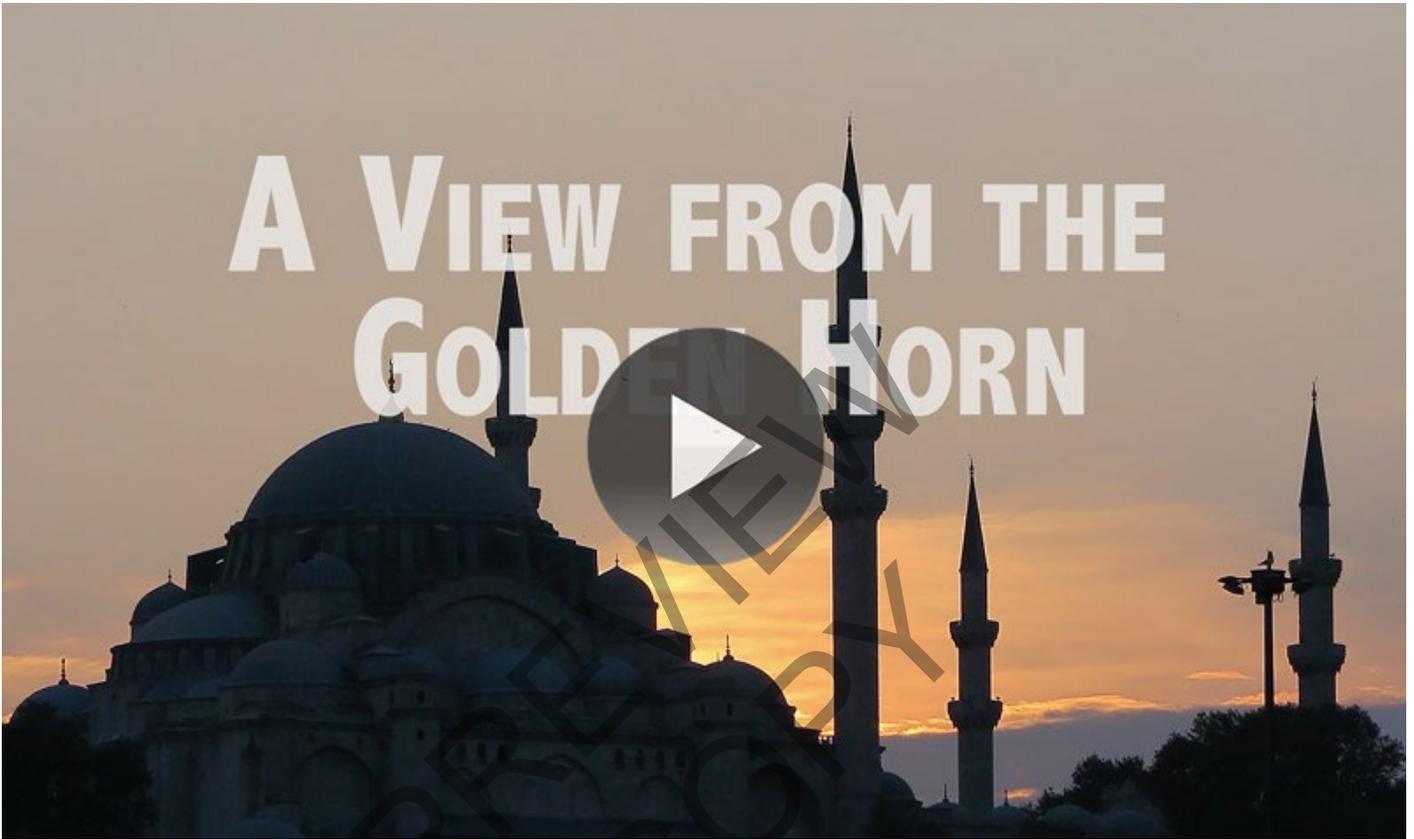
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From Procopius of Caesarea's "Buildings of Justinian," likely written in the late 550s, soon after the completion of Justinian's Hagia Sophia. Translated into English by H. B. Dewing, as printed in volume VII of the Loeb Classical Library edition, published in 1940. Read [the full text here](#).

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Watch Before You Go

Watch the [Istanbul episode of OnLocation](#), an online travel show from the creators of Approach Guides. In this quick video of Istanbul's skyline, we highlight the principal monuments in the old city (Fatih) visible from the Galata tower across the Golden Horn.



[Watch the video](#) on Istanbul's skyline.

To see all episodes in our video series, visit [approachguides.com/video](https://www.approachguides.com/video) or subscribe to our [YouTube channel](#).

Tour Map and Itinerary



Fig 1. Map with tour itinerary. See detailed view in [Google Maps](#).

While this guidebook is focused chiefly on Hagia Sophia, we have also included a visit to the church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, which likely served as a small-scale prototype (Fig. 1).

1. Hagia Sophia
2. Saints Sergius and Bacchus

Author tip: Only a 12-minute walk from Hagia Sophia, Sergius and Bacchus is worth visiting, as it provides valuable insight into the starting point from which architects crafted the much grander church.

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HAGIA SOPHIA



Fig. 2. View from southeast.

A New Vision



Fig. 5. Justinian holding a model of Hagia Sophia.
Shown from the southern perspective, the model reveals a central plan with a huge semi-spherical dome.

The Innovative Central Plan

- **Basilican plan precedent.** Prior to Justinian's Hagia Sophia, most of the greatest churches

in the Christian world were based on a design adopted from the Roman secular basilica, a meeting hall where issues of public concern were resolved by an administrator-judge: a rectangular plan with a nave and flanking aisles that drove movement along the longitudinal axis, a protruding apse, a wooden roof (usually a triangular truss) and no dome. As mentioned in the prior section, the two earlier versions of Hagia Sophia were based on such a plan (Fig. 4 in the prior section). Further, the legacies of the religion's two most sacred churches — the original 4th century versions of St Peter's in Rome and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, both built by Constantine to a basilican plan (Fig. 6) — loomed large.

- **Justinian's choice of a central plan.** Justinian broke with earlier precedent, opting for a central-plan design. The core feature of a central-plan church is typically the large dome, which functions as the gravitational center and encloses much of the interior space (Fig. 5). We explore the details of this centralized plan in the section entitled "Layout."

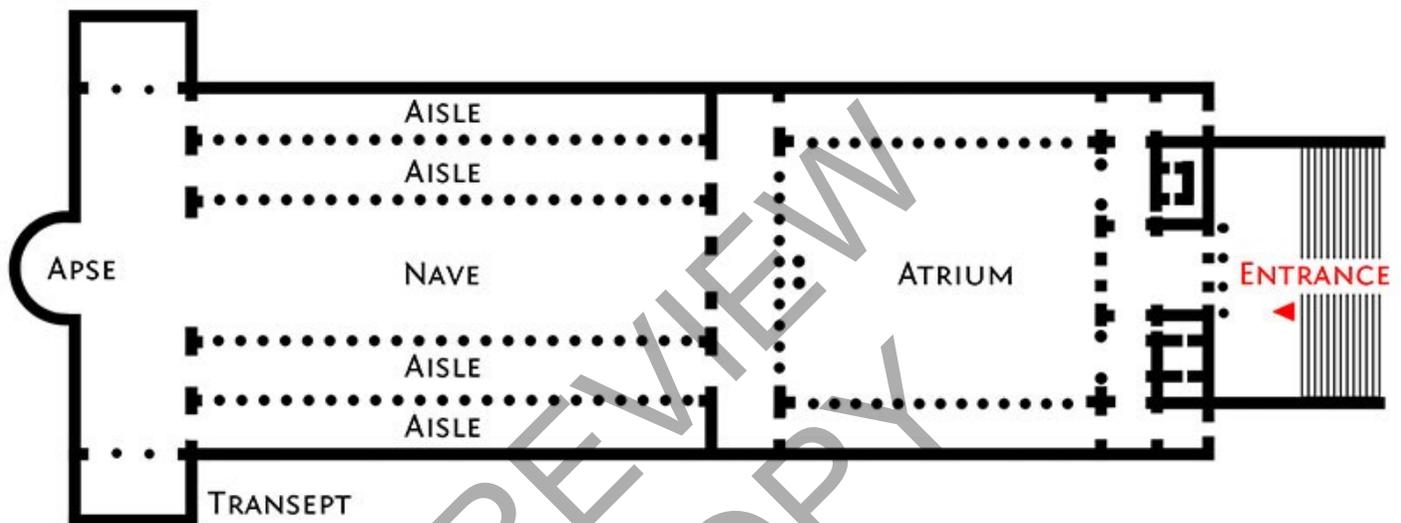


Fig. 6. Basilican plan of the original 4th century St Peter's in Rome.

Historical Context

Justinian's decision to embark on such an innovative design was shaped in many respects by recent events.

- **Nika riots.** When the third version of Hagia Sophia was planned, Justinian — who was at that point less than five years into his reign — had only just recently survived a serious challenge to his rule. The Nika riots, a week-long uprising in 532 aiming to overthrow the government and install a replacement emperor (Hypatius), were put down by Justinian's trusted general Belisarius, resulting in the deaths of 30,000 rioters.
- **Theodosian Hagia Sophia destroyed.** It was in this uprising that the second (Theodosian) Hagia Sophia was burned to the ground.
- **Church helps re-establish authority.** The building of the magnificent third version of the church helped Justinian reassert his authority — as God's regent on earth — in the wake of this destabilizing event. Hagia Sophia's rapid pace of construction was likely driven by the emperor's pressing need to communicate his divine mandate to the people of the city.

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The Construction

Getting Started

- **Architects.** Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus were entrusted with the church's design and construction. As academic theoreticians, trained in mathematics and mechanics and known by contemporaries as *mechanikoi*, they were the ideal candidates given the engineering expertise needed to craft the support structure for the massive dome.
- **A quick start.** The Nika riots were put down by the middle of January 532 and construction had already begun on the church by 23 February, only a little over a month later.

Materials

- **Brick is primary.** Brick is the primary building material, used for the walls, arches and domes. The dimensions are different than those of modern-day bricks: square in shape (375 mm per side versus the modern rectangle with sides of 110 x 230 mm) and significantly thinner (40-50 mm versus 76 mm). Further, in Hagia Sophia, the mortar bed used to secure the bricks is thicker than usual, typically thicker than the bricks themselves. This means that mortar actually plays the greater structural role. The mortar is made from slaked lime, sand and crushed brick. It is believed that the crushed brick offers hydraulic, quick-drying properties (similar to Rome's *pozzolanos*), enabling the mortar to harden by an internal chemical process, without contact with air; this was critical given the rapid pace of construction.
- **Stone for the most important structural features.** Stone was used for those features required to withstand the greatest pressures: piers and columns. The stone types utilized were chiefly limestone and greenstone (a local granite). The monolithic shafts for the columns — often of precious stones — were wrapped with bronze bands to help them withstand the compressive pressures exerted by the domes and vaults above.
- **Marble facing for decoration.** Decorative marble facing covers the walls and piers up to the level of the springing of the primary arches that support the dome.

Blistering Pace of Construction Creates Problems

- **Rapid construction.** The construction of Hagia Sophia was completed in a very short amount of time: it took only five years, ten months and four days, from 23 February 532 to 27 December 537. Upon completion, it was the biggest church in the world. At the dedication, Justinian reportedly said, referring to the king of Israel's great Jewish Temple on Temple Mount in Jerusalem: "Oh, Solomon, I have surpassed thee."
- **... leads to structural issues.** Most important, the lightning-fast pace of construction meant that: (a) mortar was afforded insufficient time to dry completely; and (b) buttressing for major structural features was likely insufficient. This caused many problems once these features were subjected to the tremendous load from the great dome: arches were deformed and piers-columns were pushed back from vertical. These two factors set the stage for the multiple dome

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Visiting

The Basics

- **Location.** Hagia Sophia occupies the privileged site — on the top of the first of Constantinople's famed seven hills (emulating those of Rome) — at the far eastern end of the peninsula that comprises the old city. See #1 on our [Google Map](#).
- **Visiting hours.** Open Tuesday - Sunday; it is closed on Mondays. The hours vary by season: summer (15 April - 1 October) from 9am - 7pm; winter (1 October - 15 April) from 9am - 5pm.
- **Tickets on location.** Tickets are purchased just inside the gate — in the [southwest corner of the complex](#) — for 30 Turkish Lira. Credit cards are accepted.
- **Advance tickets.** You can also buy tickets online from the [official ticketing website](#).
- **Photography.** Photography (without flash) is allowed.
- **Official website.** For more information, visit the [official Hagia Sophia website](#).

***Author tip:** The line for entry into Hagia Sophia is often long, but it tends to move quickly. While many local “line expeditors” will attempt to seduce you with quick entry for an elevated price or as part of a guided tour group, we recommend sticking to the line and touring at your own pace.*

Exterior

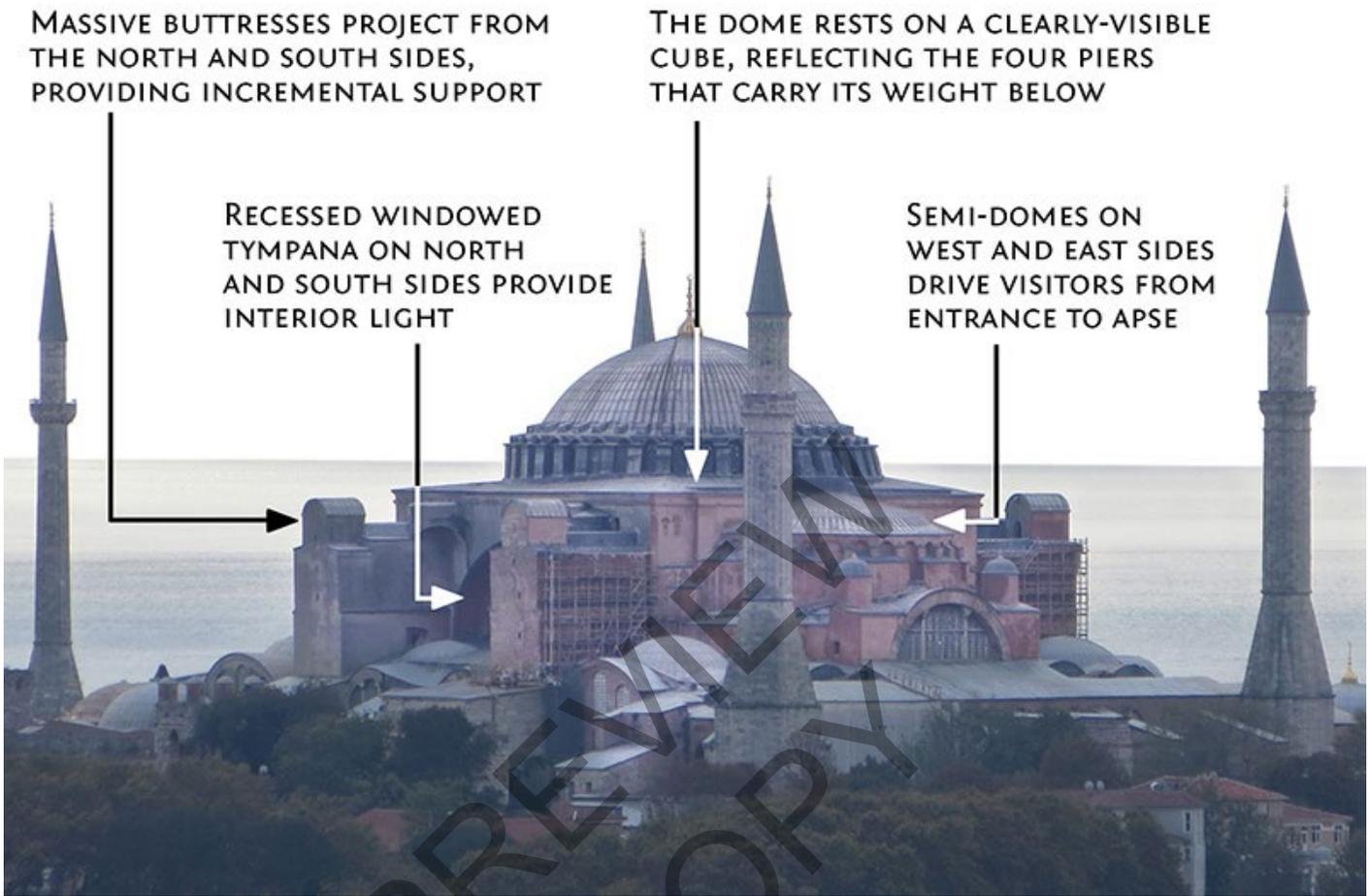


Fig. 13. View from northwest.

Overall Impressions

- **Dome on cube.** From outside, Hagia Sophia reveals its core structural arrangement: the massive dome rests on a clearly-visible cube, reflecting the four-pier support system on the interior (Fig. 13).
- **Semi-domes and tympana.** The key features reviewed in the “Layout” section are apparent from the exterior (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14): (a) the semi-domes on the north and south sides that afford directionality from the entrance to the apse; and (b) the recessed windowed tympana on the east and west sides that admit light.
- **Massive dome buttresses.** Hagia Sophia’s other exceptionally prominent exterior feature is the massive buttresses that project from the north and south sides (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14). They were designed to provide incremental support for the dome: while the piers below carry the vertical thrusts, the buttresses resist the outward thrusts.
- **Protruding apse.** The only non-rectilinear wall surface on Hagia Sophia’s exterior, the polygonal apse — the most sacred space — projects from the east wall (Fig. 13, Fig. 14 and Fig.



Fig. 14. Spotlight on Hagia Sophia. See close-up satellite view in [Google Maps](#).

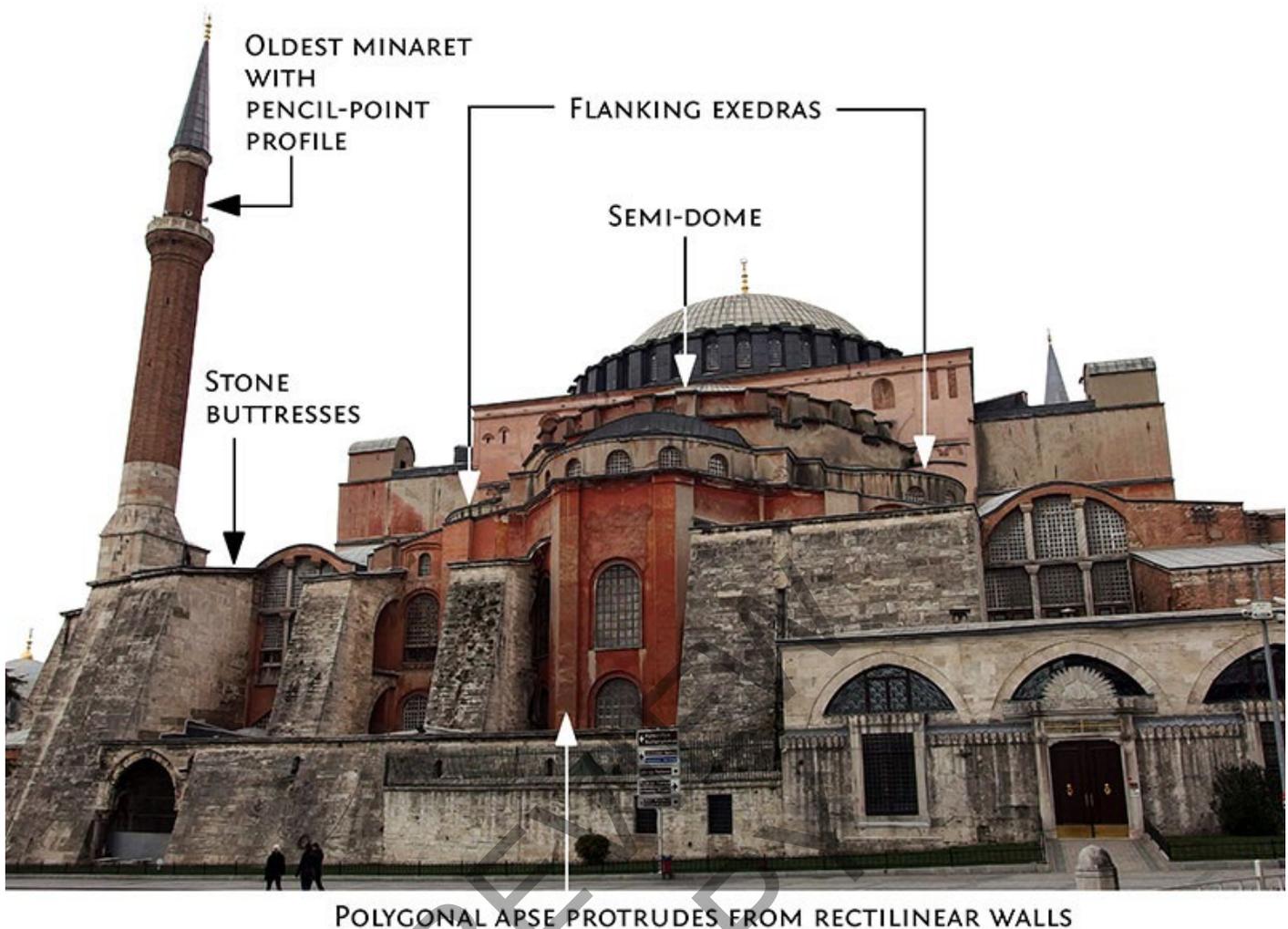


Fig. 15. East facade, with apse at center.

Minarets

Topped by lead-covered conical spires, the Ottoman minarets have graceful pencil-like profiles and are ringed with single galleries.

- **Southeast minaret.** The oldest extant minaret, constructed in 1481 by Mehmed II (the Conqueror), is immediately recognizable as it is the only one with a brick shaft. It was heightened to match the newer minarets in the 19th century (Fig. 15).
- **Northeast minaret.** Mehmed II constructed a wooden minaret in this location upon his initial taking of the city. However, it was replaced and reconstructed under sultan Selim II during Hagia Sophia's first major Ottoman renovation (1573-1577).
- **Northwestern and southwestern minarets.** The number of a mosque's minarets signals its importance. Accordingly, boosting Hagia Sophia's minarets from Mehmed II's original two to four was a major move. It followed Selim II's decision to have it house his royal mausoleum. Both minarets were added by Selim's son and successor, Murad III, in accordance with his father's wishes (Fig. 16).

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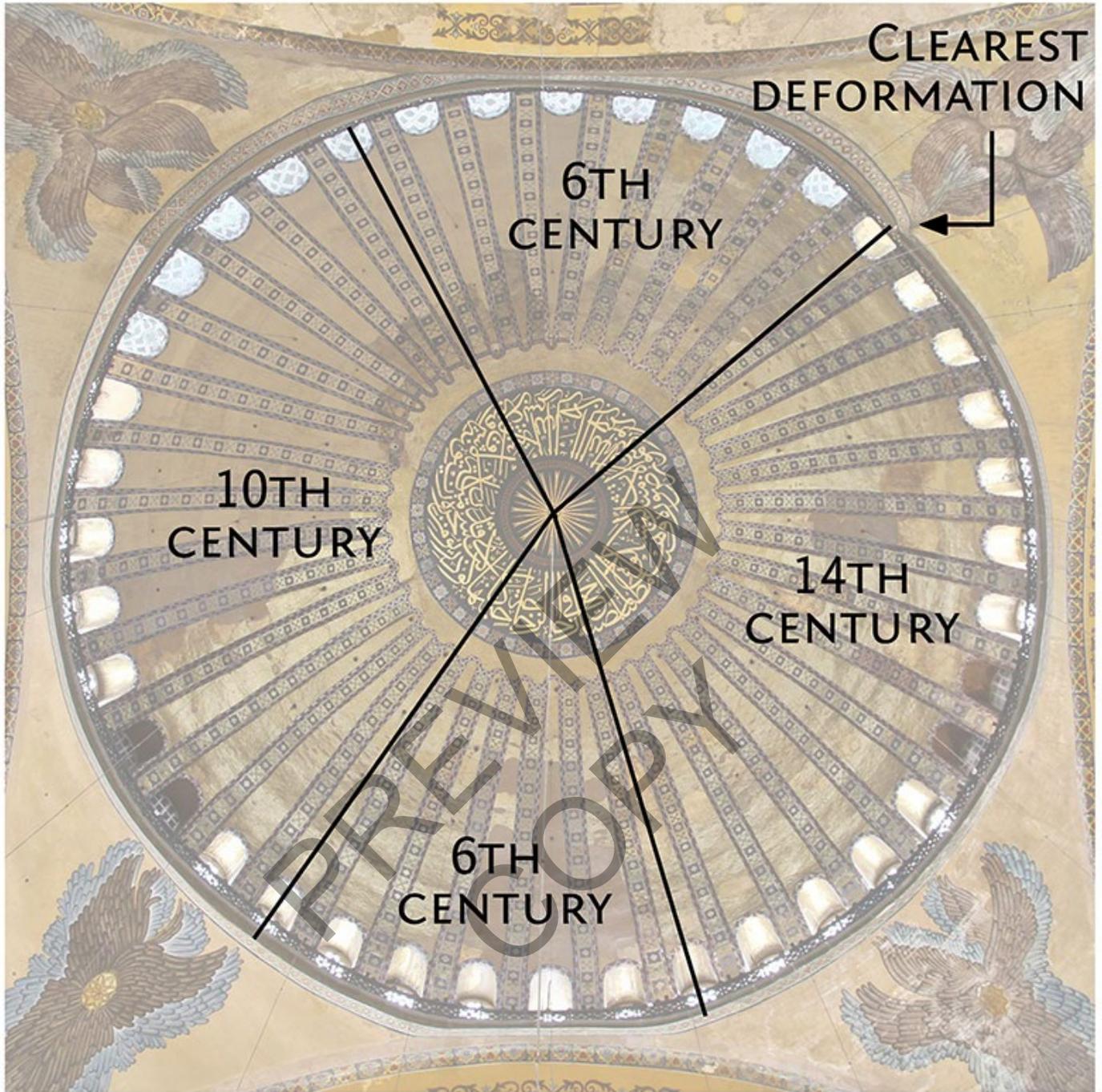


Fig. 24. Ages of parts of the dome.

Seeing the Past in the Present Dome

Original dome

Hagia Sophia's original dome was rather shallow, perhaps continuous with the surface of the pendentives; if this is the case, it would have subtended an angle closer to 90 degrees from the im-

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Islamic Features



Fig. 29. Roundels with revered names on the east wall (qibla): Prophet Muhammad (left) and Allah (right).

Eight Revered Names

Round panels, known as roundels, inscribed in thuluth Arabic script with the “eight revered names” — the names of figures of great religious significance — surround the interior space allocated to the nave. They are standard features in Istanbul’s mosques. What differentiates these roundels is their tremendous scale: 7.5 meters (24.6 feet) in diameter. Replacing the smaller originals, they were painted in the mid 19th century by the calligrapher Kazasker Izzet Efendi, the same artist responsible for the dome’s inscription.

- **On the qibla (Hagia Sophia’s east, flanking the apse) wall.** Holding the most sacred positions, the names of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad occupy the qibla wall, that is, the wall that faces Mecca, indicating the direction of prayer (Fig. 29 and Fig. 30).
- **Center of prayer hall.** The center of the prayer hall (nave) holds the names of the first four

Sunni caliphs who presided immediately after the death of the Prophet and comprise what is known as the Rashidun (“rightly guided”) caliphate: Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman and ‘Ali (Fig. 30). Positioned on the four primary piers, the Sunni founders symbolically support the dome of heaven above.

- **On the anti-qibla (Hagia Sophia’s west) entrance wall.** The anti-qibla wall holds the names of two of the Prophet Muhammad’s direct-line family members, the sons of the fourth caliph ‘Ali (the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law), in a nod to Shiite tradition: Hasan and Husayn (Fig. 30). Since Hasan and Husayn are especially revered by Shiites, their presence suggests increased inclusivity under the Ottomans’ strict Sunni regime, perhaps attesting to the ruler’s need — as universal caliph — to embrace the entire Islamic world.

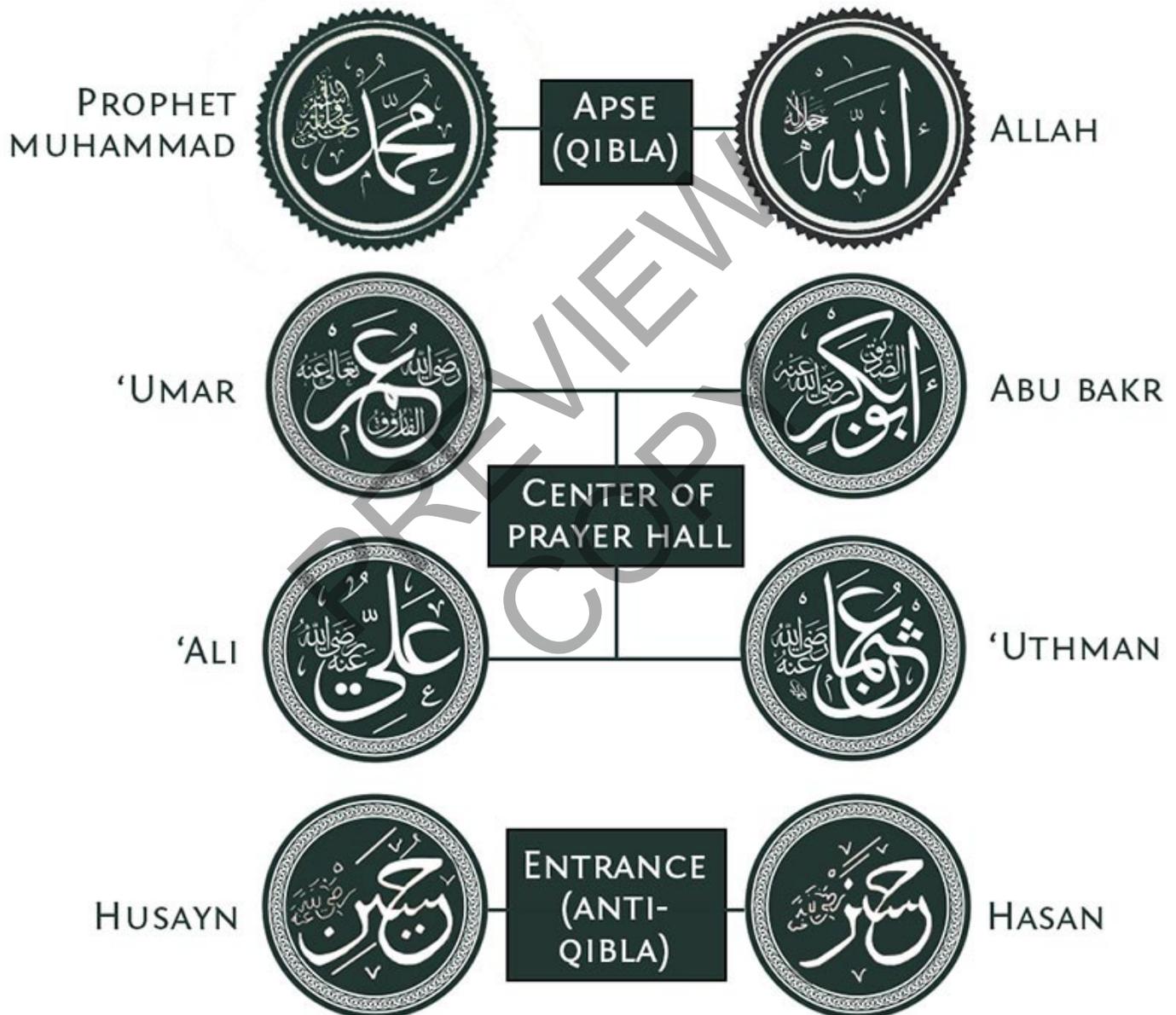


Fig. 30. The eight revered names and their typical positions in mosques.

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Tour of the Mosaics

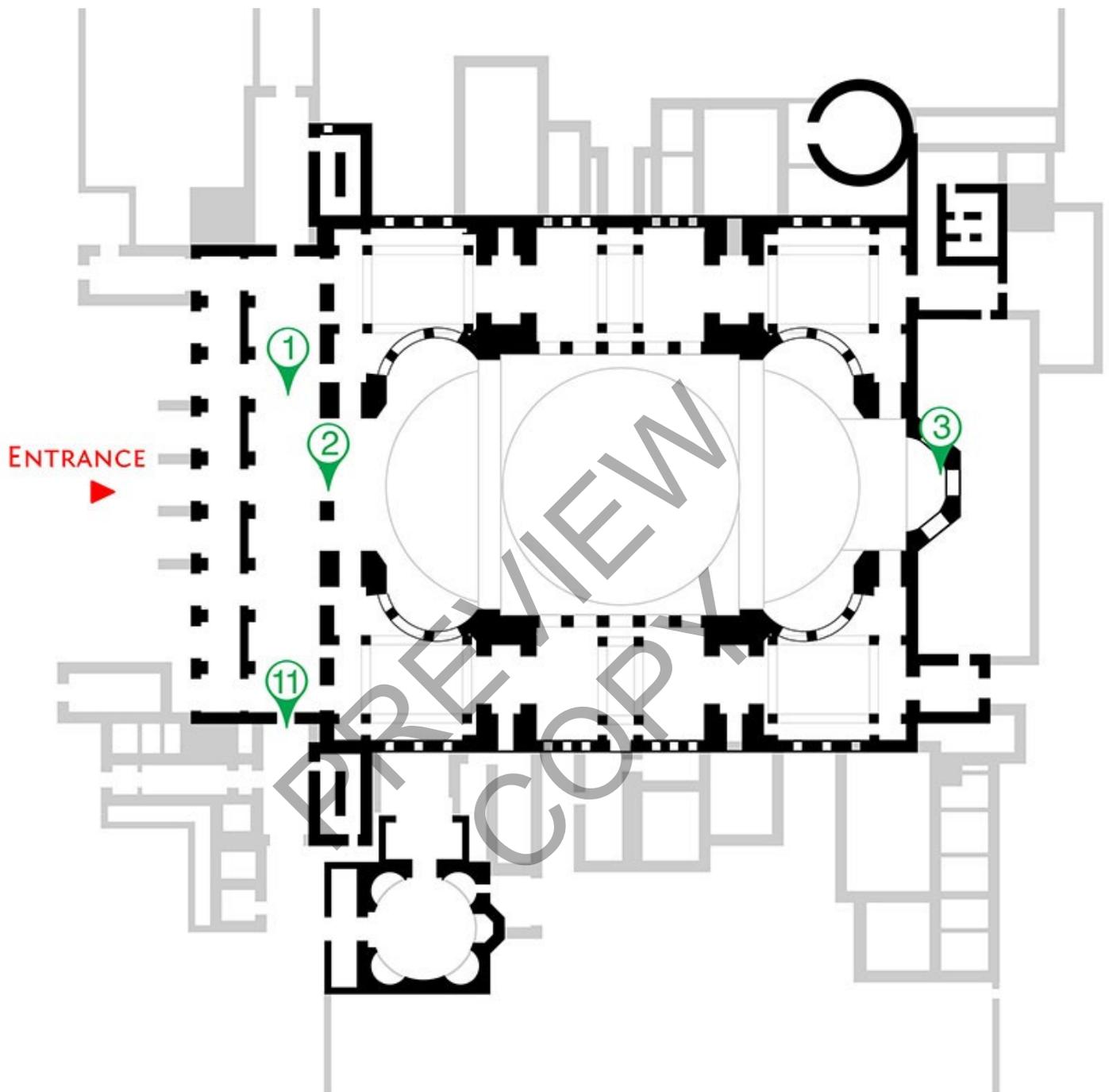


Fig. 33. Mosaics tour, ground level.

Our tour of Hagia Sophia's mosaics follows a logical progression through the church's interior, beginning on the ground floor, continuing in the gallery above and finally concluding at the ground floor exit ([Fig. 33](#) and [Fig. 34](#)).

1. Inner narthex: geometric and floral designs
2. Christ with Leo VI
3. Apse Virgin and Child

4. Alexander
5. Archangel Gabriel
6. Deesis
7. Seraphim
8. Church fathers
9. Virgin with John, Eirene and Alexios
10. Christ with Constantine and Zoe
11. Virgin with Constantine and Justinian

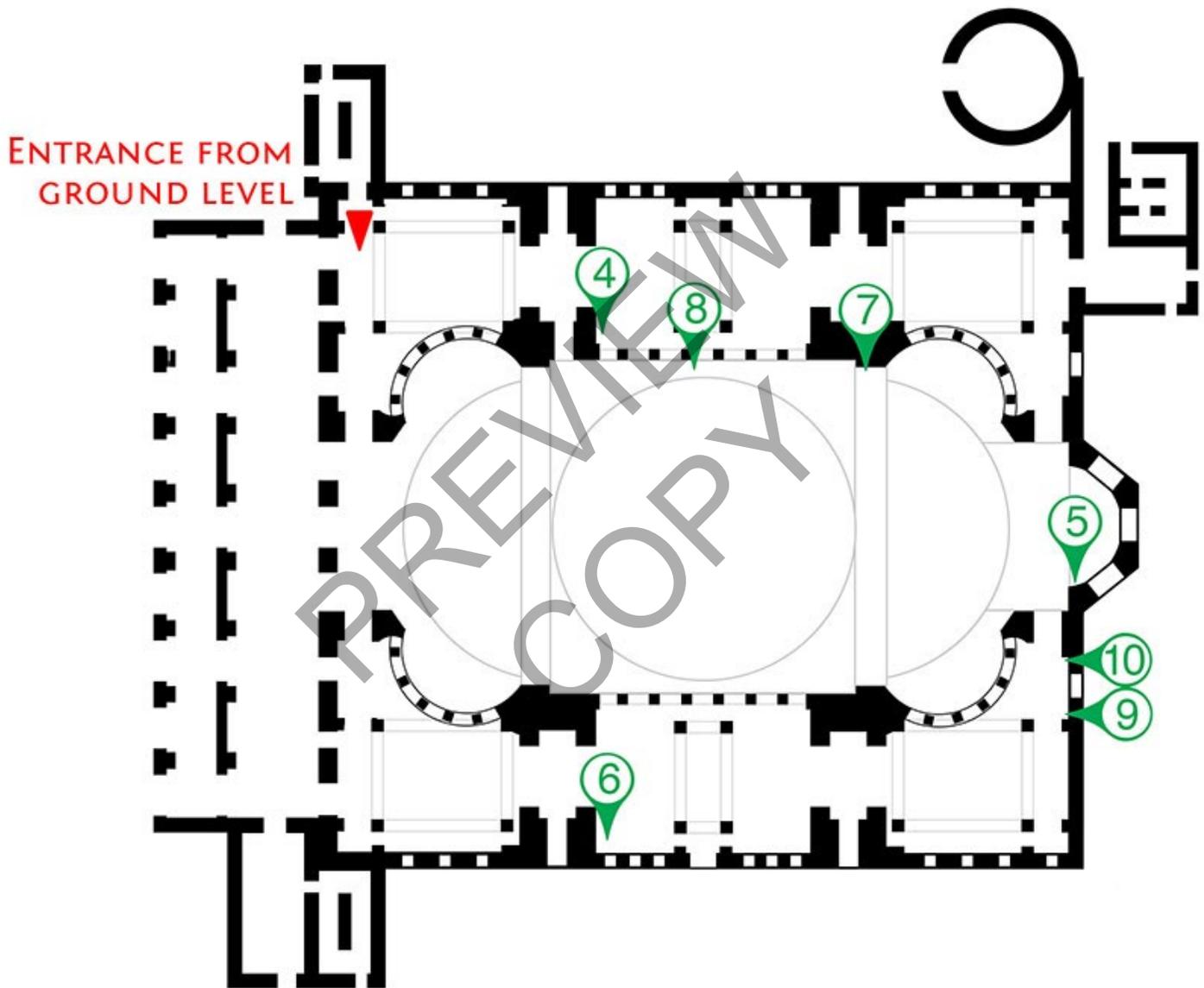


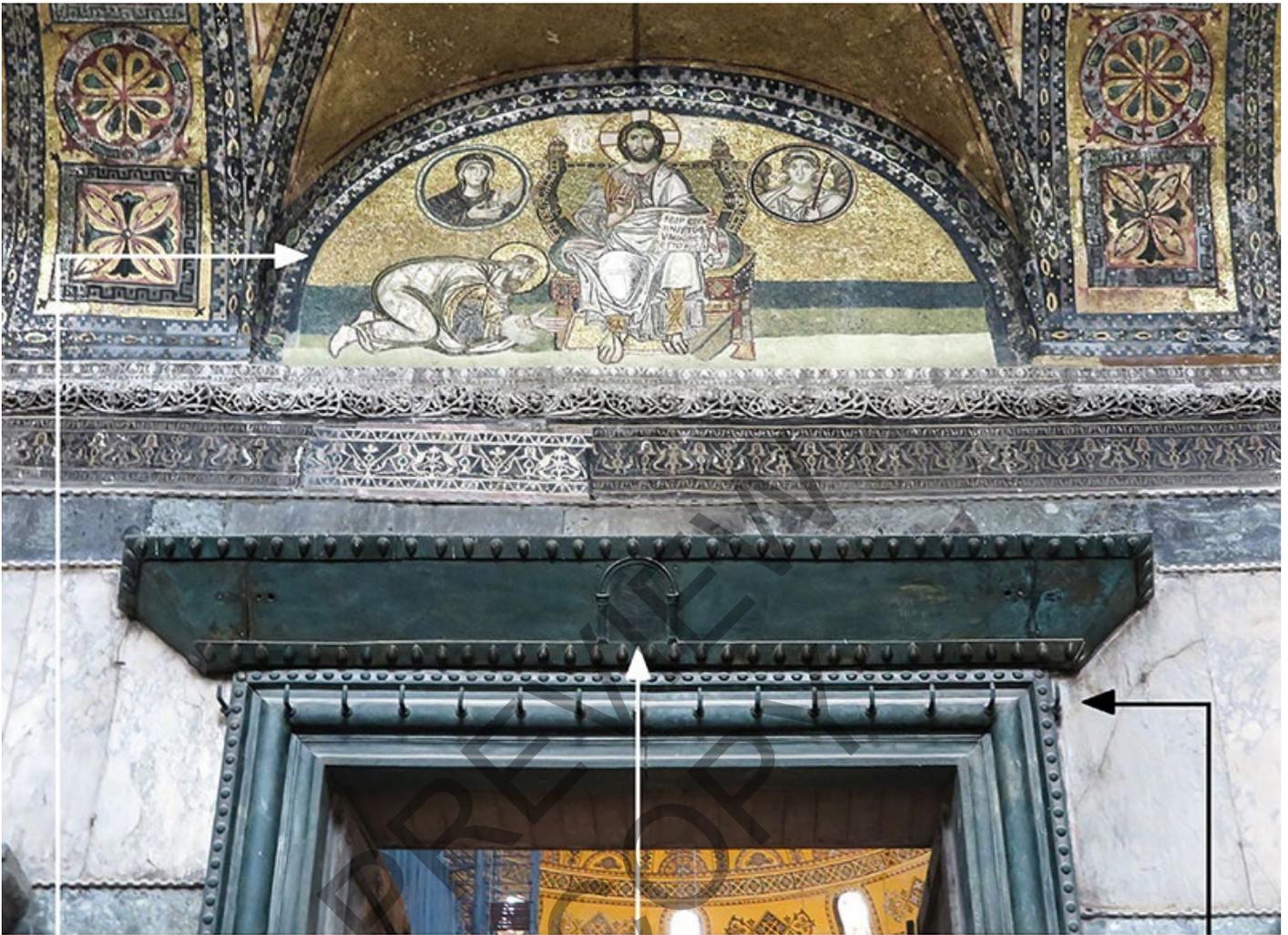
Fig. 34. Mosaics tour, gallery level.

Author tip: For another world-class collection of mosaics that rivals that of Hagia Sophia, we suggest visiting the [Chora museum](#) (aka Church of the Holy Savior in Chora). The 14th century Palaiologan mosaics are some of the finest in the world!

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2. Christ with Leo VI



LUNETTE MOSAIC WITH
LEO VI AT THE FEET OF
ENTHRONED CHRIST

RELIEF OF DOVE DESCENDING
ON THE BOOK OF GOSPELS.
SEE CLOSE-UP IN FIG. 46.

CURTAIN HOOKS

Fig. 42. Imperial entrance with lunette mosaic above.

The Details

- **Location.** Inner narthex. The mosaic occupies the lunette above the main (central) entrance, known as the imperial entrance, where the inner narthex affords access to the main body of the church (Fig. 42).
- **Date.** Part of the earliest group of figurative mosaics, likely dating from the second half of the 9th century. It was likely not whitewashed until the third Ottoman renovation in the mid 18th century.



VIRGIN MARY
AS INTERCESSOR
FOR LEO VI

CHRIST AS PANTOCRATOR
HOLDS JOHN 8:12:
"I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"

ARCHANGEL
MICHAEL(?) AS
CHURCH GUARDIAN

Fig. 43. Christ with Leo VI.

The Lunette Mosaic

The relief depicts Christ with a prostrate emperor Leo VI at his feet and the Virgin and an archangel set in circular frames.

Emperor Leo VI

- **Theme of repentance.** Leo VI (ruled 870-912) assumes a different position than all other royal figures depicted on the church's interior: whereas others stand bearing gifts, Leo approaches bent over on his knees with hands extended toward Christ's feet, a clear sign of supplication and repentance (Fig. 43 and Fig. 44).
- **Backstory.** While no doubt symbolic of the central Christian theme of contrition as the way to salvation, there is a more personal reason that Leo might have chosen such a posture: around the time the mosaic was executed, Leo sought the church's recognition of his fourth marriage (to empress Zoe Karbonopsina), an event that had been expressly banned under religious laws. Without post-facto sanction from the religious patriarch, his first and only son from this marriage — the future Constantine VII — stood to lose the throne. So, Leo literally had to repent

for his actions in order to preserve his legacy.

- **Linking earth and heaven.** The earth-conjuring green tiles in the bottom third of the lunette give way to heavenly gold ones in the upper two-thirds (Fig. 43 and Fig. 44). While Leo's knees and arms rest on the green ground, his head crosses over into the gold, consistent with his role as God-appointed emperor. We will see the theme of ruler as cross-realm actor repeated frequently on the interior.
- **Blue and gold robes.** Similarly attesting to his quasi-divine status as emperor, Leo VI wears similar robes to those of Christ, symbolic of his dual — both human (blue) and divine (gold) — nature (Fig. 44).



Fig. 44. Close-up, Leo VI.

Enthroned Christ

- **Pantocrator.** The image represents Christ as Pantocrator enthroned in heaven. The faint inscription IC XC (Jesus Christ monogram) in white script is a later addition (Fig. 45).
- **Gospel inscription affords insight.** As is typical, he raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing; his left hand holds a book of gospels (Fig. 45). However, unlike others in the church, the book is open, showing an inscription that reads: "Peace be with you. I am the light of the world." This represents a combination of two addresses by Christ in the gospel according to John. However, the continuation of the second half of the inscription — from [John chapter 8, verse 12](#) — is key to the significance: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." This returns to the church's central theme: Christ is the light — the logos incarnate — that guides the faithful to salvation.

- **Reinforces ruler's heavenly mandate.** The expression “I am the light of the world” carried further political significance, as the Byzantine emperor used this same expression to convey that he functioned as Christ's representative on earth. In this respect, it represents Leo's divine investiture.



Fig. 45. Close-up, Christ as Pantocrator.

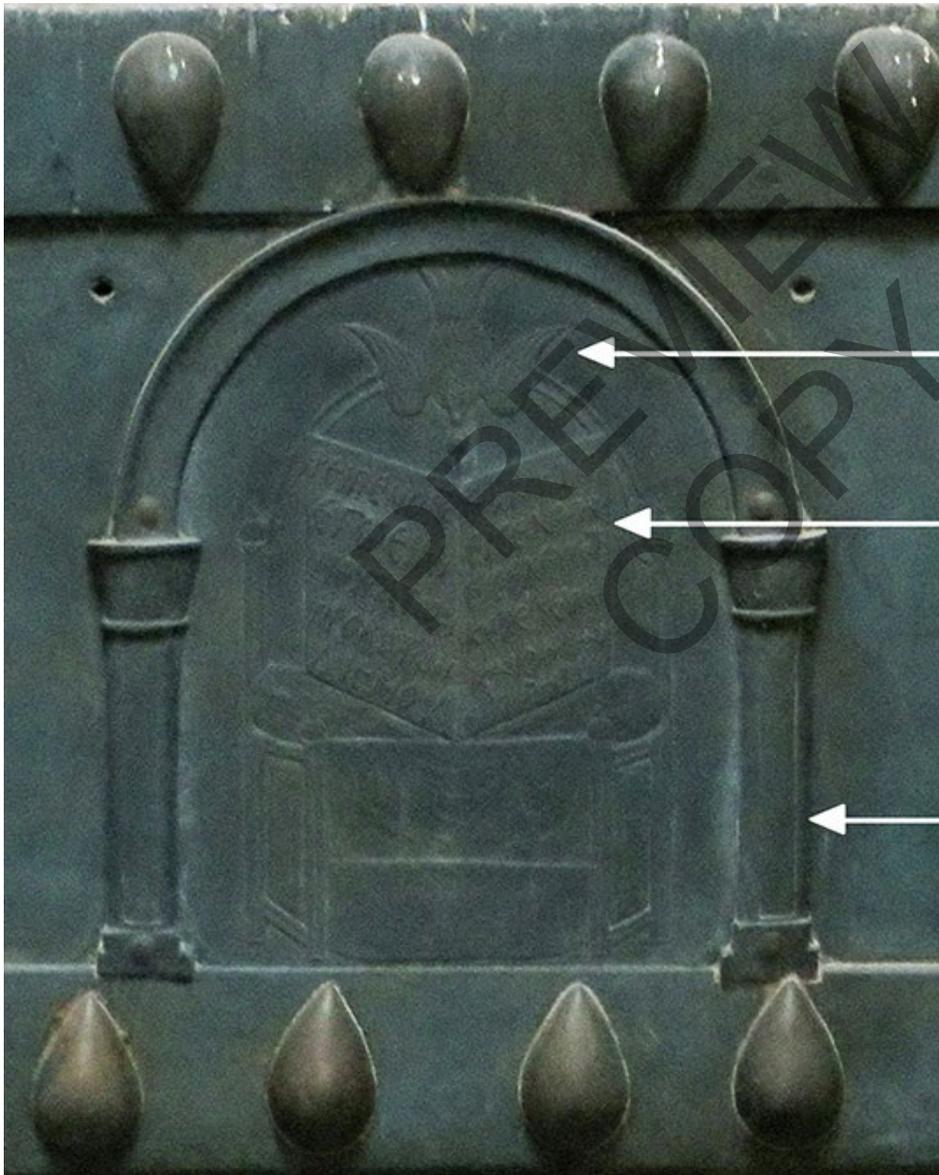
Virgin Mary

- **Theotokos.** The Mother of God, shown turning her head toward Christ, occupies a medallion above the emperor (Fig. 43). Her blue robe has the trademark three gold crosses that signal perpetual virginity (*aeiparthenos*).
- **Virgin as intercessor.** As we will see again in the Deesis mosaic inside, the Virgin Mary was

commonly employed as an intercessor on behalf of humanity, petitioning for their forgiveness and salvation on the day of judgment (for more on this, see our discussion of “6. Deesis”). To make clear her role, she extends both hands toward her son, in the exact same gesture as that of the emperor below.

Archangel

- **Michael as guardian.** An archangel occupies the medallion opposite the Virgin (Fig. 43). Although it could be Gabriel, it is more likely Michael, known for his role in leading of the army of God against the forces of evil. He stands as protector of the church and stern reminder of forthcoming judgment. In this role, he looks outward toward those entering the church, rather than at Christ to his side.



THE DOVE DESCENDS FROM HEAVEN AS THE HOLY SPIRIT, BRINGING GOD'S WISDOM

THE ENTHRONED BOOK STANDS FOR CHRIST, HIS WORDS (LOGOS) REVEALING GOD'S MESSAGE, THE PATH TO SALVATION

THE COLUMNS SUPPORTING THE ARCH ARE HAGIA SOPHIA, THE RESIDENCE OF CHRIST AS LOGOS

Fig. 46. Close-up, relief on imperial door.

The Doorway

- **Imperial entrance.** This was the imperial entrance, reserved exclusively for the emperor and the religious patriarch. At this spot, the emperor would ceremonially prostrate himself (*proskynesis*) three times before entering the church for services.
- **Wood of Noah's ark.** In Byzantine times, it was widely believed that the bronze-gilded door that formerly occupied this location was made from the wood of Noah's ark. And this association was important: Hagia Sophia was the symbolic vessel that would transport the faithful to salvation in Christ.
- **Curtain hooks.** The doors give a hint as to how the church was decorated in the time of Justinian: the lintel holds prominent hooks, presumably used to hold a curtain that covered the opening (Fig. 42).
- **The dove relief.** A relief carving just above the lintel again reinforces the church's essential symbolism: it shows a dove (the Holy Spirit) descending from heaven with God's wisdom to an enthroned open book (Christ as logos). And perhaps most important: the scene occurs within an arch resting on two pillars (Hagia Sophia) (position in Fig. 42; close-up in Fig. 46). To remove any doubt as to the significance of the symbolism, the book bears a Greek inscription, drawn from [John chapter 10, verses 7-9](#), that speaks of salvation through God's word — as expressed by Christ as logos — to all those who enter through the door:

*Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.
All who have come before me are thieves and robbers,
but the sheep have not listened to them.
I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.
They will come in and go out, and find pasture.*

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Our Recommendations

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Continuing on Your Own



Fig. 81. Virgin and Child, Chora museum.

If you have completed the tour and wish to explore further on your own, consider these options:

- **Chora.** We highly recommend seeing the unrivaled 14th century Byzantine mosaics at [Chora museum](#), located in Edirnekapi on the far western end of the old city. The extensive mosaics depict, in chronological sequence, the life of the Virgin Mary ([Fig. 81](#)).
- **Visit Sinan's mosques.** Another fantastic itinerary centers on the mosques built by the great 16th century architect Sinan. It is so compelling, in fact, that we have dedicated an entire guidebook to the subject, which includes background on the architect's style and a tour of his top ten mosques in the city. Get more details on the [Approach Guide to Sinan's mosques](#).

Istanbul Revealed **Sinan's Mosques**

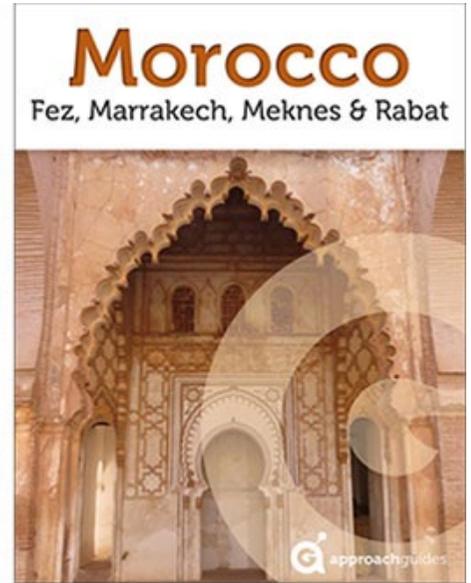
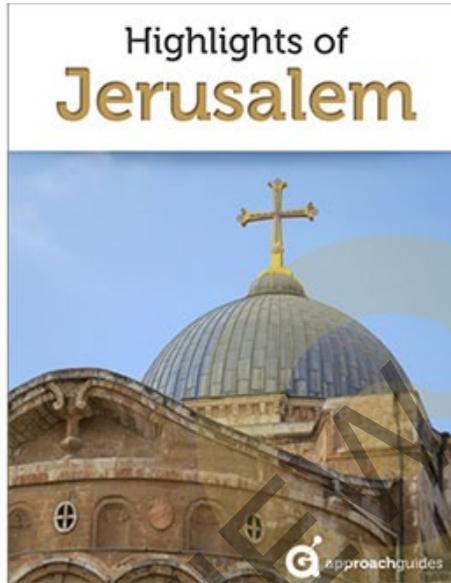
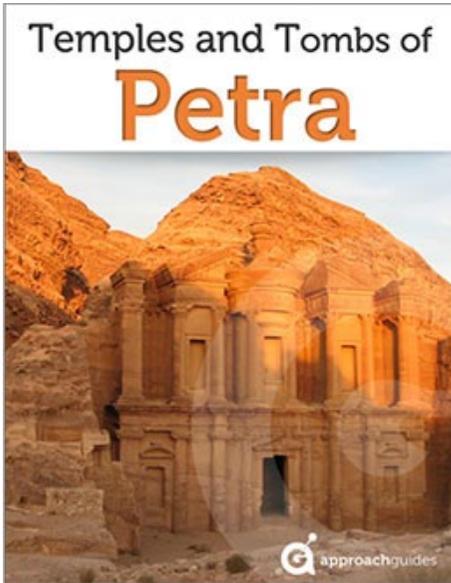


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Continuing Travel in the Middle East

If you are planning visits to other destinations in the Middle East, check out our [Middle East guide-books](#).



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Istanbul Reading List

We've re-imagined the travel reading list for those seeking more rewarding and fulfilling experiences around the world. [Explore our collection](#) of “Trip Reads” — expertly-curated print books, ebooks, magazine articles, papers from leading academics, online resources, music, podcasts, videos and more.

Here are just a few of our Istanbul recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **A Short History of Byzantium** Byzantine history told by one of the world's most engaging historical storytellers. *By John Julius Norwich.*
- **“Islamic Carpets”** A first-class review — of technique, style and regional variations — of carpets from around the Islamic world. *By Richard Ettinghausen.*
- **The Sounds of Turkey** Listen to a playlist containing a personal collection of Turkey tracks compiled by our founder Jennifer Raezer. The perfect pre-trip soundtrack.
- **Let's Visit Istanbul!** Just for kids! Join sibling Chihuahuas Bella and Harry as they travel to Istanbul with their family and cruise the Bosphorus River, visit the Blue Mosque, the Grand Bazaar and Topkapi Palace. *By Lisa Mansion and Kristine Lucco.*

We encourage you visit tripreads.com to get our Trip Reads for [Istanbul](#) and other destinations throughout the world. Enjoy your travels!



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Praise

Compulsive (and compulsively informed) travelers, the Raezers are the masterminds behind the downloadable Approach Guides, which are filled with a university course-worth of history and insights for 62 destinations worldwide. Why we love it. The Raezers share our desire for deep, well-researched information on the wonders of the world.

Travel + Leisure

What started as one couple's travel notes aimed at filling in the gaps in guidebooks has become ApproachGuides.com — a menu of downloadable travel guides that cover cultural and historical topics of interest to thoughtful travelers. What's hot: Bite-sized travel guides that specialize in topics ranging from ... the foods of Italy to one that helps you explore the historical and architectural significance of Angkor's famous temple structures in Cambodia.

Los Angeles Times

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Seek out adventure.

Revel in the experience.

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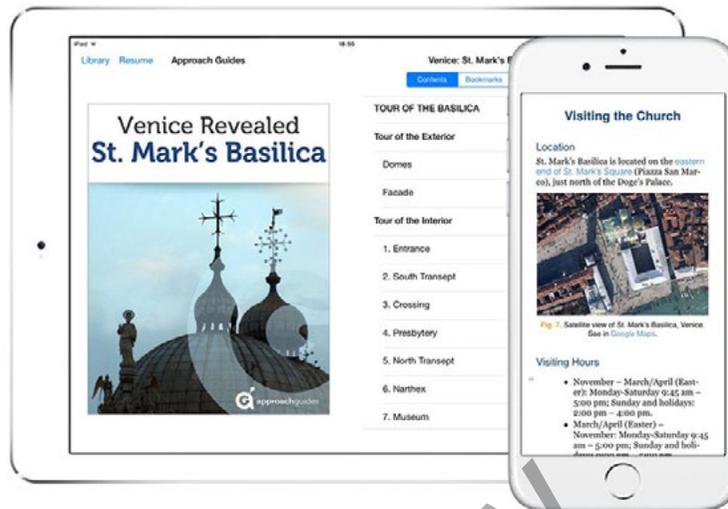
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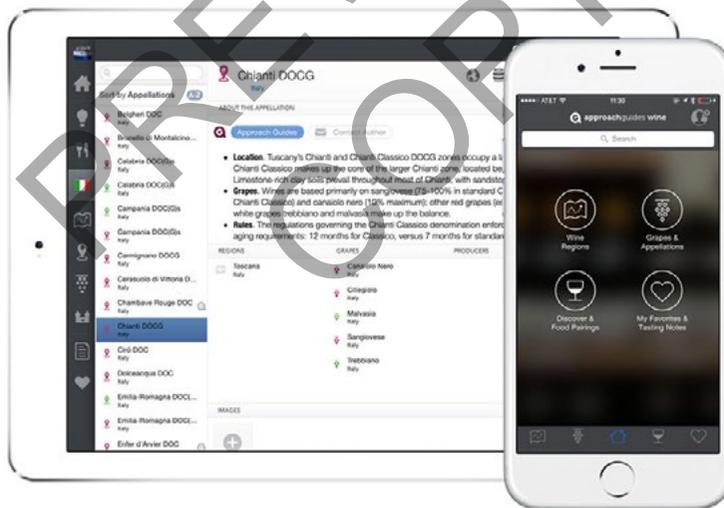
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