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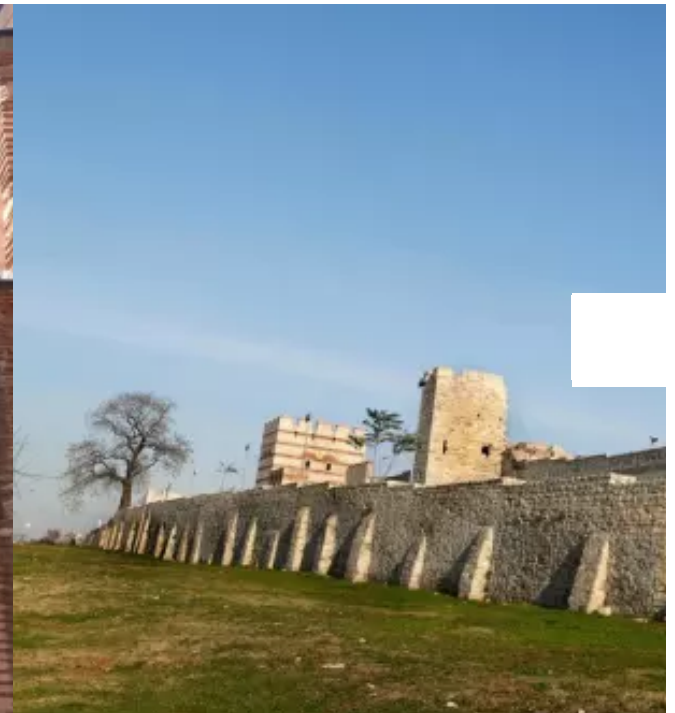
Turkey

Istanbul's Byzantine legacy undermined by Ottoman restoration

Turkey's Byzantine buildings



Istanbul's 12th-century Pantokrator monastery has been restored as a mosque rather than as the "sum of its history", say some experts



The restoration of Istanbul's city walls and other monuments has drawn criticism for seeking to brush aside 1,000 years of history



JUNE 5, 2015 by: **Daniel Dombey** in Istanbul

Zeynep Ahunbay looks with disapproval as she stops before a poster of herself and her late husband alongside Istanbul's Byzantine city walls.

“They put this photo here to make it look as if we are supervising things here, as if we are OK with what is being done,” she says, referring to the Turkish authorities. “But they go on doing what they want to do and not asking anybody.”

Ms Ahunbay, a grey-haired academic who for decades has worked on historic sites in the city dating from the 1,000-year Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman era that succeeded it, is scathing about the Turkish state's efforts at restoring the city's monuments.

She and other experts say a battle over Turkey's past is being fought in Istanbul's rich archaeological heritage, with [President Recep Tayyip Erdogan \(http://next.ft.com/content/4ad7a2f8-0aab-11e5-98d3-00144feabdc0\)](http://next.ft.com/content/4ad7a2f8-0aab-11e5-98d3-00144feabdc0) and his cohorts seeking to brush aside more than a millennium of Christian history in an effort to glorify the country's Muslim Ottoman past for political ends.

Ms Ahunbay winces as she contemplates the Palace of the Porphyrogenitus, or Tekfur Sarayı, a 13th century Byzantine palace restored as a 17th century Ottoman building, complete with rectangular windows in stone Byzantine lunettes, a red-tiled roof and changes to the masonry.

Not far away, the 12th century Pantokrator monastery complex, where Ms Ahunbay worked for many years, is in the final stages of being refurbished as a 19th-century mosque. Istanbul's oldest church, the 5th-century St John of Studios, is also scheduled to become a Muslim place of worship.

Ms Ahunbay says the reconstructions encapsulate two of Mr Erdogan's chief characteristics during his time in office — a nationalist brand of Islamism and a strong emphasis on construction. “They don't care about Byzantine heritage; they don't consider it as their own,” she says of the country's rulers.



The president has been evoking Turkey's Ottoman past ahead of [critical elections](http://www.ft.com/topics/places/Turkey) on Sunday, in which he is seeking to bolster his power. Last weekend, he held a rally attended by several hundred thousand people in Istanbul to mark the 562nd anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople.

Flanked by men dressed as Ottoman soldiers, he declared that the June 7 vote would be a conquest to rank alongside the 15th-century victory over the Byzantines. Some of his supporters enthusiastically invoke the example of the sultans in arguing that Turkey should shift to a presidential system. "Before the republic we had the sultan system and we were running the whole world," said Mehmet, an attendee at a recent ruling party meeting.

A day after the rally, thousands gathered outside the 6th-century Aya Sofya, the church turned mosque that was declared a museum by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the staunchly secular founder of the Turkish republic. The crowd called for the site to become a Muslim place of worship once again. Two Aya Sofyas in other Turkish cities have already reverted from museums to mosques.

Ferudun Ozgumus, an archeological adviser to several of the restoration projects, argues that the decision to restore buildings as they were in the Ottoman, rather than Byzantine, period is not necessarily ideological.

“How can you restore it according to the 12th century or the late 14th century or the 16th century?” he asks of the Pantokrator monastery complex, known in Turkish as Zeyrek Camii. “What we do know is how it looked once, in the photographs taken in the 19th century: that’s the main thing our criteria are based on.”

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However, other experts counter that restoration does not rely on photographic evidence. “The technologies available for historic restoration and scientific documentation have advanced dramatically. The knowledge and historic awareness is there, through organisations such as Unesco,” says Robert Ousterhout, a Byzantinologist who worked on the Pantokrator with Ms Ahunbay.

Mr Ozgumus argues that the Pantokrator complex had been seriously deteriorating and adds that Ms Ahunbay and her colleagues had been unable to prevent this because of lack of funds. He says nothing has been permanently changed at the sites under renovation and that much has been uncovered — notably intricate floor patterns at the Pantokrator complex showing designs of angels, griffins and stars of David. But he does not know how the Byzantine floors will be displayed when the building serves once again as a mosque.

“The building has been restored as a mosque rather than as the sum of its history,” says Mr Ousterhout. He lists several other instances of allegedly insensitive restoration or maintenance — including the city walls, a former church known as Little Aya Sofya and a 14th century Dominican structure known as Arap Camii, where unique Italian-Byzantine frescoes have been covered up.

“There is less and less of historic Istanbul to see with each of these restorations,” he says.

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