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## A Visit to Byzantium

For those who might be wishing to follow in Princess Ol'ga's footsteps, here are a few notes and selected images on what one finds there as of June 2014.

As noted in one of my recent reviews on H-EarlySlavic, I had gone to Istanbul with the expectation of being able to see for the first time in my memory the interior of Hagia Sophia unobstructed by scaffolding. Also, I was hoping to see the recently discovered runic inscription there. On both counts I was disappointed: apparently the scaffolding that had been in the northeastern corner of the church for years did come down recently, but then in short order a much larger scaffolding was erected along much of the north side of the interior, the result being even worse than what was there before. Also, access to where the new runic inscription is (on a windowsill on the east) was blocked. At least now one can get an unobstructed view of the apse. My overall impression of the magnificent building is that, despite all the ongoing restoration etc., it is looking somewhat shabby, overrun as it is by thousands of tourists. In the gallery on the second floor there is a somewhat gaudy gift shop. In the space beyond it is still a display of the absolutely stunning large photos of the mosaics taken by a Turkish photographer—they look much better in his photos than in real life. On the first floor on the southern side was a display of framed examples of contemporary Islamic calligraphy, suggesting that the authorities view the church merely as museum exhibit space. Of course it is officially a museum, though it also had a long history as a mosque after 1453. There is some recently erected scaffolding on a small part of the exterior which minimally blocks views from the south.

A great deal else in Istanbul is “na remont” these days, as the Russians would say. Major parts of the Archaeological Museum are closed for renovation, though there is still a lot to see there, with a selection of the best Classical sculpture now moved into a somewhat cramped entrance corridor but well displayed. The galleries with the displays encompassing the history of Byzantium are open. I had hoped to see the Chinese porcelain in kitchen buildings of the Topkapi Saray, but the renovation of that space, I was told, is still ongoing and that important collection is not accessible. There was some kind of (temporary?) set of kiosks being erected all along the west side of the Hippodrome, apparently closing access to the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum. The renovation of the Zeyrek Camii (Church of the Savior Pantocrator) is ongoing, though clearly they have made a lot of progress since 2010. I was not able to go inside. It is not clear to what degree we are talking restoration or rebuilding here, as clearly some exterior areas of the complex are undergoing new construction (if along the lines of what had apparently been there but decayed). I was told recently that the Kariye Camii (Church of the Savior in Chora) is partially closed inside, but did not go there on this trip (I have an extensive set of photos from 2010). The remains of the Palaeologian palace (Tekfur Saray) near the city walls are being “restored” apparently for use as a conference center. I assume that has to mean major rebuilding inside the shell of the old walls.

Other parts of the infrastructure of Istanbul continue to grow, something that is essential, of course, given the population pressures, though one has to wonder about the wisdom of some

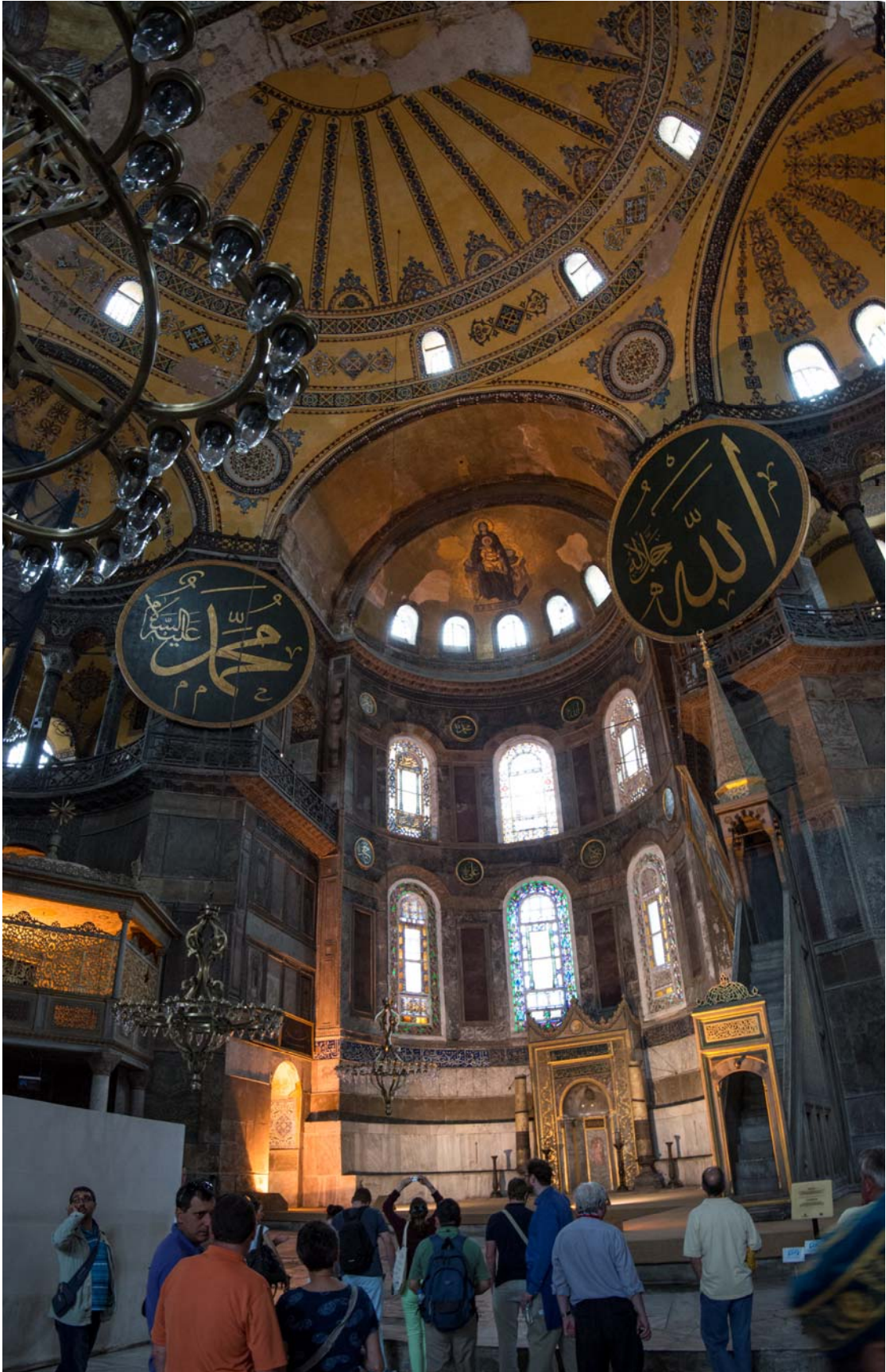
decisions. As you would know from the news, the government decision to transform Taksim Square provoked major demonstrations a couple of years ago. They have gone ahead and re-routed traffic from the square into a tunnel running under the west side of it. Above ground there is now a ghastly expanse of bare concrete pavement where the street and some of the trees used to be. They have not clearcut all of the park (as had been planned), at least not yet. The result of this to date is the creation of a hugely uninviting urban space, where one no longer wants to stroll and linger, and where the bustling life of the place has been killed.

One can now take the Metro under the Bosphorus from the old Sirkeci railroad station to Usküdar. The city has taken over the Havaş airport bus service, renaming it Havataş, and is being sued by the company that formerly ran it. The buses do run regularly, though the ones going to Taksim now have a different loading point not far from where they used to stop. If going or coming from the airport on the Asian side, it is now best to take the ferry to Kadiköy and catch the bus at the ferry dock there.

The huge new (third) Bosphorus suspension bridge is under construction just beyond the Byzantine/Genoese fortress at the north end of the Bosphorus where the waterway opens out into the Black Sea. A few years ago, the Prime Minister (allegedly as an election-campaign ploy) announced plans to build a canal that would route most of the shipping from the Black Sea parallel to the Bosphorus and thus head off potential shipping disasters in that all too busy waterway. I was told that the plans for the canal are going ahead, unrealistic as the project may seem from a distance.

The images below are a sampling, reduced from large files. Be aware that the perspective (when one is shooting up at an angle) is not always ideal. I was using 28-300 and 16-35 mm lenses, the latter especially having a certain amount of distortion. To the extent possible, I have tried to correct for that and other technical issues in the processing. The first image for the Fethiye Camii is a composite, which explains the odd bend in the metal support bars but otherwise gives, I think, a good overall impression of the main area of the church and the positioning of many of the mosaics. In order here, you get Hagia Sophia, the Zeyrek Camii, the Fethiye Camii (Theotokos Pammakaristos) (for which I now have a fairly complete set of good images), and the north end of the Bosphorus with the piers of the new bridge.

I have much more extensive photo documentation (a lot from 2010) and will be happy to supply on request print or internet quality versions of the photos if I have what you may want.







Mother of God in conch of apse.



Archangel on south side of apse.





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The location of the coronation ceremony.



Leo VI receiving investiture of the Holy Wisdom, over west door in narthex.





Dedication mosaic (Justinian and Constantine) door of south vestibule



Deesis in south gallery





The long-known runic inscription ("Halfdan..."), on balustrade of south gallery; see E. A. Mel'nikova, *Skandinavskie runicheskie nadpisi. Novye nakhodki i interpretatsii* (M., 2001), p. 258.



South gallery.





Alexios. In south gallery.



Narthex



























