

HAGIA SOPHIA

VISIONS OF THE SOUTHWEST VESTIBULE



Fig. 1. Hagia Sophia, southwest vestibule, lunette mosaic over the north door, Istanbul, Turkey, 10 November 1934. (Source: *Dumbarton Oaks*)



Fig. 2. Restoration, uncovering X, after cleaning but still with a few patches of plaster left untouched at bottom, November 14, 1933. (Source: *Dumbarton Oaks*).



Fig. 3. Tracing of Mosaic in Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul (South Vestibule) 1936. (Source: Harvard Art Museums)



DNIVSTINI NVSPP VC  
 [Dominus Noster Iustinianus Perpetuus Augustus]  
 (Our Lord Justin, Eternal Augustus)

VICTORI VCCCI  
 EXERGUE: CONOB

Fig. 3.1. Justinian I, Gold, Solidus, Constantinople, 527-565. (Source: Dumbarton Oaks)

It is imperative that we allow the next generation of curators and cultural heritage preservationists to acknowledge that protecting ancient artifacts and sites is not always a black and white journey. Despite the validity of arguments that caution of the danger present in allowing outsiders or Western academic institutions/museum organizations to venture onto endangered cultural sites, for fear of losing ownership or oversight of important national treasures, not all collaborations result in the deterioration of irreplaceable antiquities and sites. The mosaics that have illuminated the interior of the Hagia Sophia for over a thousand years, have been placed in and out of unstable conditions for far too long—regimes that have dominated the sociopolitical sphere in Istanbul have always used the Hagia Sophia as one of the most influential and effective mediums of virtue signaling, propaganda, and national identity establishment, and this must be stopped lest we accept the risk of losing the global treasures that grant the structure its timelessness.

For the last century, the Hagia Sophia has had an intricate and long-lasting relationship with the Byzantine Institute—the platform through which scholars Thomas Whittemore and Paul Underwood worked to uncover and document the rebirth of the Hagia Sophia's interior mosaics and structure. Dumbarton Oaks has digitized an immense amount of paperwork and photographic documentation in an aim to immortalize the success of the work completed by the aforementioned scholars and by the Byzantine Institute in Istanbul throughout the last century.

A closer look at the lunette mosaic over the north door located in the southwest vestibule of the legendary church (Fig. 1) visually articulates the positive contributions of the Institute at the site, with the plaster that once suffocated the likenesses of Justinian I, the Virgin Mary, and Constantine, slowly but surely being carefully detached from the walls upon which it was never intended to stand (Fig. 2). Images of the restoration, as seen in Figure 2, can be directly overlaid with *later* images of the restoration, like Figure 1, in order to establish an argument that supports the clear benefits of well-organized and well-funded collaborative projects that include international organizations, while also not prioritizing the exclusion of local identity. The documentation of the site's renovation by Thomas Whittemore and those he worked with successfully introduced a wave of new accessible and detailed material that has aided the continued study and preservation of the site, without having to continue to risk its condition further. With mosaic rubbings (Fig. 3), for instance, the detail and craftsmanship of the site can be studied in a tangible medium, and with a newfound clarity. The undeniable and dominating power of Justinian I is not restricted in the Dumbarton Oaks collection solely to mosaic pieces or the walls of the Hagia Sophia alone—the digitization efforts of the organization have also granted high-definition access of exceptionally vibrant and well-kept coins to the public, like the golden solidus of Justinian I (Fig. 3.1). This golden coin depicts a front-facing Justinian I whose dominance remains tactfully asserted through the raised globus cruciger he holds in his right hand, immovable and unapologetically staring at all those who encounter the face of the coin from the time of its conception to the day it stops circulating, even digitally.

The polarization and increased radicalization that global politics has witnessed in the last century has worsened the chances of survival for monuments of world heritage like the Hagia Sophia—yet this is assuredly not the way it *has* to be, nor is it something that new generations of curatorial scholars and heritage historians should learn to adapt to and accept.



*Fig. 4. Apse, group at work on scaffold, 10 July 1936. (Source: Dumbarton Oaks)*

Organized, attentive, and specialized work on the scaffolds at Saint Sophia, presented by the digitized files of the Byzantine Institute's work published by Dumbarton Oaks, illuminates the care with which the structure has been approached in the past, and the care with which it can be approached once more today (Fig 4). The layers of history and symbolism that exist within the walls of the Hagia Sophia, as well as on them, were seen as living entities full of color, life, and speech, by those who worked through the Institute to restore the "beautiful textile-pattern mosaics" that were even referred to as having been "freed" once uncovered. Models of the Hagia Sophia have been utilized for over a millennium to form a visual relationship with the individual illustrated *next* to the structure, and the structure itself, and it is saddening to have to demonstrate to future cohorts of researchers and restoration experts that we simply were not able to prevent anything from happening to these pieces— all we were able to do was to publish statements condemning the actions of certain nations, with no real consequences established for countries ignoring the outline for preservation and cultural heritage site protection outlined by agencies with platforms large enough to be heard around the world.



Fig. 5. Seal of Ekdikoi of Hagia Sophia. Justinian I and Virgin Mary, holding model of Hagia Sophia. (Source: Dumbarton Oaks)



Fig. 6. Hagia Sophia, southwest vestibule, lunette mosaic over the north door, Istanbul, Turkey. 1934-36. (Source: Dumbarton Oaks)

In Figure 5, the Seal of Ekdikoi of Hagia Sophia establishes a physical yet figurative metaphor between the Virgin Mary on the right and Justinian I on the left, and so much so is the influence of the structure emphasized on this small circular token, that the Hagia Sophia is centered, unifying the emperor and the Mother of God and all the holiness attached to her. This trope is continued in the Byzantine tradition, with the lunette mosaic previously mentioned also using a model of the Hagia Sophia in the hands of Justinian I to reflect the grandeur and recognizable visual power of the structure in the eyes of all those who encounter it. In fact, Figure 6 works

exceptionally at demonstrating with clarity the way in which ancient craftsmanship can be protected and unearthed by responsible practices that take their time and prioritize the documentation and accessible record-keeping of monuments that ultimately have *no* owner. In just over the course of 12 months, the Byzantine Institute granted a new life to the mosaic that had stood obscured and forgotten for so long in the past. Collections of symbolic mosaics risk more than just being covered by plaster and hidden from humanity for centuries when they are placed in the hands of regimes who don't care about them. There is so much more to take into consideration when coming to terms with the fact that governments and regimes like those operating in Istanbul today have the complete and unstoppable ability to completely dismantle the structure to feed the fire of their personal agenda—and they will face no consequences from UNESCO, the same agency that individuals and high-scholars applaud for releasing and implementing new practices of preservation and historic engagement.