

# Hagia Sophia of Thessaloniki

also known as “Saint Sophia”, “Holy Wisdom”

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The church dedicated to the Holy Wisdom, or the Divine Wisdom (Hagia Sophia in Greek), is located to the south-eastern part of the city of Thessaloniki (Northern Greece). It has served as the Metropolitan church of Thessaloniki and during the Latin occupation of the city (1204-1224), it became the Latin cathedral. The present building was built at the end of the 7th century, over the remains of a much larger five-aisled basilica dedicated to saint Mark, destroyed by the big earthquake of 620. Hagia Sophia is almost square in plan with a tripartite sanctuary projecting from its eastern end. It belongs to the type of transitional cross-in-square church, an evolution of the basilica with a dome. The nave measuring around 31 x 29 m (excluding the apse) is covered by a large cubic dome pierced by 12 arched windows, projecting above the timber roof. The dome which collapsed during the earthquakes of 813-820 and was replaced, is supported by four barrel vaults departing from four large piers at the corners of the central space. Each pier is divided into sections by arches that are wider on the ground level, while above are smaller and double. The church possesses lateral aisles divided from the central nave by colonnades alternating columns and narrow piers, a narthex and galleries above them, with the west gallery being a 10th century addition. The lead seals carrying names of bishops and other ecclesiastics discovered in the southwest corner of the west gallery suggest that this space may well have been used by the Church administration. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki (1347-1359) and the leading figure of the hesychastic movement, was buried in Hagia Sophia. In 1430, following the capture of Thessaloniki by the Ottomans, the church was converted into a mosque. What remains from that period is the tower on the north-western corner of the church, probably the basis of a minaret. Following the city's liberation in 1912 it was again converted into a church. The monument was destroyed by fire in 1890. It was restored between 1907 and 1909 by a team led by Charles Diehl and was inaugurated on 29 June 1913. Following the earthquakes of 1978, Hagia Sophia was restored again, and excavations were undertaken inside the monument and in its adjacent courtyard. The mosaic decoration of Hagia Sophia belongs to different phases. The original mosaics in the sanctuary are dated between 780 and 797, based on the presence of a colossal cross and the monograms of emperor Constantine VI and Irene. In the dome is depicted the Ascension of Christ. Below Christ, seated in a rainbow, stands the Virgin flanked by two angels. Around them are assembled the twelve Apostles. The information provided by the inscription that accompanies the scene, indicating that it was added under the Archbishop of Thessaloniki Paul, permitted to identify him as the friend of Patriarch Photios of Constantinople and thus to estimate the mosaic's creation to the 880's. In the semi-dome of the apse was installed the Virgin enthroned holding Christ, either contemporary with the mosaic of the dome; or, an 11th-century addition. The composition replaced an iconoclastic cross. The church had mosaic flooring and its walls were covered with marble slabs. The marble columns and their capitals come from an earlier building. In the 11th century Hagia Sophia was decorated with frescoes, still surviving at the windows of the narthex. Their creation is contemporary to the addition of the narthex, after 1037. The church contained also a four-columned sepulchral monument embedded within the south-eastern pier cluster decorated with frescoes by two different painters. It was dated around the first quarter of the 13th century, when the city was liberated from the Latins. The parts of the tomb that have survived, fragments of the monument's frescoes, of its mosaic decoration, as well as the marble slabs of the church are exhibited at the Museum of Byzantine Culture of Thessaloniki; while its marble ambo transferred to Istanbul in 1905, is currently displayed at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul.



Date Range: 650 CE - 1913 CE

Region: Thessaloniki

Region tags: Greece, Thessaloniki

Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Thessaloniki

### Status of Participants:

✓ Elite    ✓ Religious Specialists    ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

## General Variables

### Sources and Excavations

#### Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Theodoridou, K., *The Architecture of Hagia Sophia*, Thessaloniki, Oxford, 1988
- Source 2: Cormack, R., "Το ψηφιδωτό της αψίδας του ναού της Αγίας Σοφίας στη Θεσσαλονίκη", *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας*, 1981 (10), 111-136
- Source 3: Kalligas, M., *Die Hagia Sophia von Thessaloniki*, Würzburg, 1935 (Ph.D. dissertation)

#### Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: [http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/2/gh251.jsp?obj\\_id=1661](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/2/gh251.jsp?obj_id=1661)
- Source 1 Description: Description of Hagia Sophia in Odysseus, Greek Ministry of Culture
- Source 2 URL: <https://www.thebyzantinelegacy.com/hagia-sophia-thessaloniki>
- Source 2 Description: Description of Hagia Sophia in Byzantine Legacy website
- Source 3 URL: [https://youtu.be/uLi\\_iX2NQJg](https://youtu.be/uLi_iX2NQJg)
- Source 3 Description: 3d model and description of Hagia Sophia

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

– Yes

↳ Type of excavation:

– Scientific

↳ Years of excavation:

– Year range: The excavations inside the monument and in its adjacent courtyard started in 2021. They are still ongoing. They are part of a renovation and landscaping project at the site.

↳ Name of excavation

– Official or descriptive name: The name of the excavation is not specified.

## Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

– Other [specify]: The church is built in the center of the city of Thessaloniki. It is not associated with a particular landscape feature

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

– No

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

– Yes

↳ Is there a distinct boundary between the place and the urban fabric:

– No

↳ Is the place located significantly within the urban fabric:

Is the place centrally located, or at the crossroads of significant pathways?

– Yes

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

– No

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

– No

– No

## Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer once for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

– Yes

↳ A single structure

– Yes

↳ The structure has a definite shape

–Other [specify]: The church is almost square in plan with a tripartite sanctuary projecting from its eastern end. It belongs to the type of transitional cross-in-square church, an evolution of the basilica with a dome.

↳ One single feature

–Other [specify]: The church combines a variety of features

↳ A group of structures:

– No

↳ A group of features:

– Yes

↳ Are they part of a single design/construction stage:

– No

↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:

– No

↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:

Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function

– Worship

↳ Worship:

– Communal

↳ Is the structure/feature finished:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature intended to last beyond a generation:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature modified through time:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature destroyed:

– No

↳ Has the structure/feature been reconstructed:

– Yes

↳ In modernity

– Post-Renaissance

Notes: The monument was destroyed by fire in 1890. It was restored between 1907 and 1909 by a team led by Charles Diehl and was inaugurated on 29 June 1913. Following the earthquakes of 1978, Hagia Sophia was restored again

### Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Dedicated to a supernatural being:

– Yes [specify]: It is dedicated to Saint Sophia, the Holy Wisdom, or the Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ

↳ Dedicated to more than one supernatural being:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:

– No

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– No

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– Yes

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↳ Groups:

– Specialized labourers/craftspeople

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– No

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– No

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– No

Was the creation of the place sponsored by an external financial/material donation:

– I don't know

Notes: The church was most probably funded by a patron or the Archbishopric of Thessaloniki, who is the owner of the monument. We don't really have information regarding the person who sponsored it.

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

– Expression of devotion with no expectation of favor in return

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

– No

## Design and Material Remains

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### Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

– No

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

– No

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– Yes

↳ Earth

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– I don't know

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Sand

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– I don't know

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Clay

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– I don't know

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Plaster

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– I don't know

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↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:  
– No

↳ Wood  
– No

↳ Grass  
– No

↳ Stone  
– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:  
– I don't know

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:  
– No

↳ Other  
– Other [specify]: Marble used for the columns and capitals and the slabs covering the walls; gold, silver and glass were used for the tesserae used for creating the mosaics; pigments were used for painting the frescoes

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials  
– No

## Decoration

Is decoration present:  
– Yes

↳ Is decoration part of the building (permanent):  
– Yes

↳ On the outside:  
– No



↳ On the inside:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration attached to the building, i.e. movable reliefs or tapestries

– Yes

Notes: The church was decorated with marble slabs attached to the walls.

↳ Is the decoration figural:

A figural representation is defined here as one that contains the depiction of discernible human, anthropomorphic, animal, or zoomorphic forms. In general, it differentiates between animate and inanimate beings, as well as between narrative compositions and still life, landscapes, abstraction, etc. Answer [Yes] for each type of figure depicted

– Yes

↳ Are there gods depicted:

– Yes

Notes: Jesus Christ

↳ Are there other supernatural beings depicted:

– Yes

Notes: Angels

↳ Are there humans depicted:

– Yes

Notes: Saints

↳ Are there animals depicted:

– No

↳ Are there animal-human hybrids depicted:

– No

↳ Is the decoration non-figural:

– Yes

↳ Is it geometric/abstract

– Yes

↳ Floral motifs

– Yes

↳ Is it writing/caligraphy

– No

Notes: Inscriptions are accompanying the mosaics of the dome, the apse and the frescoes.

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: Non-figural decoration characterizes the decoration of monuments erected during the Iconoclastic period

↳ Is the decoration hidden or restricted from view:

– No

– No

↳ Are there statues present:

– No

↳ Are there reliefs present:

A relief as opposed to sculpture carved on the round is a work of sculpture in which the figures project from a background support, generally a flat surface. Reliefs can be carved out of stone, clay, or a similar material.

– No

↳ Are there paintings present:

– Yes

↳ Are they panel paintings [movable]:

– Yes

Notes: The church is hosting services. The movable furniture of Orthodox churches traditionally includes panel paintings (icons). The church contained icons also during the Middle Ages and the Early modern period.

↳ Are they wall paintings:

– Yes

↳ Type

– 'True' fresco

↳ Paintings representing the gods worshipped at the place:

– Yes

Notes: Saints

↳ Paintings representing mythological narratives:

– No

↳ Paintings representing human/historical narratives:

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

– Other [specify]: The decoration of the church was originally aniconic, since it was created during the Iconoclastic era. The frescoes were added in the 11th century. Only fragments of the programme still survives.

↳ Are there mosaics present:

– Yes

↳ Mosaics representing the god(s) worshipped at the place:

– Yes

Notes: Jesus Christ

↳ Mosaics representing mythological narratives:

– Yes

Notes: The scene of the Ascension of Christ is depicted in the dome.

↳ Mosaics representing human/historical narratives:

– No

↳ Abstract mosaics:

– Yes

↳ Other [Specify]

– Other [specify]: The mosaic decoration of the church includes aniconic (floral and geometric, crosses) decoration, effigies of Christ and Virgin Mary and a narrative scene, the Ascension of Christ.

↳ Are there inscriptions as part of the decoration:

– Yes

↳ Are the inscriptions ornamental:

– No

↳ Are the inscriptions informative/declarative  
[e.g. historical narratives, calendars, donor lists etc...]

– Yes

↳ Are the inscription a formal dedication:

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: The inscriptions of Hagia Sophia either indicate a historical event, such as the creation of the mosaics or indicate the person or biblical event depicted.

↳ Other type of decoration:

– No

## Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:

– Yes

– Yes

↳ Eyes (stylized or not)

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings (zoomorphic)

– No

↳ Supernatural beings (geomorphic)

– No

↳ Supernatural beings (anthropomorphic)

– Yes

Notes: Jesus Christ and angels

↳ Supernatural beings (abstract)

– No

↳ Portrayals of afterlife

– No

↳ Aspects of doctrine (e.g. cross, trinity, Mithraic symbols)

– Yes

Notes: Mosaics with crosses installed during the Iconoclastic era

↳ Humans

– Yes

Notes: Virgin Mary, Apostles and Saints

↳ Supernatural narratives

– Yes

Notes: The Ascension of Christ is depicted in the dome.

↳ Human narratives

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: The church is decorated as well with aniconic decorative elements

## Beliefs and Practices

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### Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:

– No

Notes: No it is not. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, was though buried in the church in 1359. The church includes another sepulchral monument dated to the 13th century. The person buried therein remains unknown.

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

– No

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

↳ As cenotaphs:

– No

↳ In cemetery:

– No

↳ Family tomb/crypt:

– No

↳ Domestic context:

Interred beneath floors of house, or in areas of domestic activity

– No

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, was buried in the church in 1359. The church includes another sepulchral monument dated to the 13th century. The person buried therein remains unknown.

## Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

– No

– No

Does the supreme high god communicate with the living at this place:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– No

↳ In dreams:

– No

↳ In trance possession:

– No

↳ Through divination practices:

– No

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: Every person communicates with God at this place via prayer and by participating at the liturgies and services taking place at the church.

– Yes

↳ Through divination practices:

– No

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

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↳ Other

– Other [specify]: God communicates via the prayer of the faithful/pilgrims and during the services

Are previously human spirits present:

– No

– No

Do human spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

– No

Are nonhuman supernatural beings present:

– No

– No

Do nonhuman spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

– No

Are mixed human-divine beings present:

– No

– No

Do mixed human-divine beings communicate with the living at this place:

– No

– No

Is the supernatural being/high god present in the form of a cult statue(s):

– No

– No

### Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:

– No



Do visitors communicate with the gods or supernatural beings:

– Yes

Notes: Visitors and pilgrims communicate with God. Angels and Saints via prayer and during the services.

↳ Do visitors communicate with gods:

– Yes

Notes: They communicate with the triadic God.

↳ Do visitors communicate with other supernatural beings:

– Yes

Notes: Angels and Saints

## Ritual and Performance

### Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:

– No

Are there self-sacrifices present:

– No

Are material offerings present:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings mandatory:

– No

↳ Are material offerings composed of valuable objects:

– Yes

Notes: Material offerings (often ex-votos) can be very expensive objects indeed. This was also the case since the creation of the monument and until today.

↳ Are material offerings composed of daily-life objects:

– Yes

Notes: Material offerings can be very expensive objects, daily-life objects and also food such as olive oil, wine and bread used for the services. This was also the case since the creation of the monument and until today.

↳ Are material offerings interred at this place (in caches):

– No

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: In general material offerings can be anything, from liturgical vessels, to money, land and even food.

Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory:

– No

Is maintenance of the place performed:

– Yes

↳ Is it required:

– Yes

Notes: It is required since services are taking place there everyday. Furthermore the church needs maintenance by specialists such as architects, engineers and archaeologists.

↳ Is there cleansing (for the maintenance):

– No

↳ Are there periodic repairs/reconstructions:

– Yes

Notes: The dome collapsed during the earthquakes of 813-820 was replaced. The west gallery is a 10th-century addition to the church. When the church was turned into a mosque a tower (minaret?) was added. The monument was destroyed by fire in 1890. It was restored between 1907 and 1909. Following the earthquakes of 1978, Hagia Sophia was restored again and excavations were undertaken inside the monument and in its adjacent courtyard.

↳ Is the maintenance performed by permanent staff:

– Yes

Notes: Staff of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki in collaboration with the Archbishopric of Thessaloniki.

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: The monument is constantly conserved and restored. It is a living monument.

## Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

– No

Notes: The church though not a pilgrimage site per se was and is still visited by faithful for prayer and for participating at the liturgies and the services taking place there.

Is this place a venue for feasting:

– No

Are festivals present:

– No

Notes: Yet, the festivals of the Greek Orthodox calendar are celebrated during services taking place at the church.

## Divination and Healing

Is divination present:

– No

Is healing present/practiced at this place:

– No

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Yes

↳ Do large-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

Notes: Liturgical services are taking place daily at the church.

↳ Do small-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

Notes: Such as baptisms, weddings, funerals.

↳ On average how many participants are present in large-scale rituals:

–specify: Impossible to specify

↳ How often do these rituals take place:

– specify: Daily

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there synchronic practices:

– Yes

Notes: Christian Orthodox liturgy and the various services are synchronic practices.

↳ Are there intoxicants used during the ritual:

– No

## Institutions and Scriptures

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### Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– Yes

↳ Present full time

– Yes

↳ Present part time

– No

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific sex/gender:

– Yes

Notes: Male monks and clergy

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific ethnicity:

– No

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific class/cast:

– No

↳ Are religious specialists dedicated to the place for life:

– No

↳ Are the religious specialists stratified in a hierarchical system:

– Yes

Notes: The hierarchy respected is the one established by the Greek Orthodox Church

↳ Is access within the space segregated by this hierarchy:

– No

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:

– No

Is this place used for the training of religious specialists:

– No

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:

Institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders

– Yes

Notes: The church belongs to the Archbishopric of Thessaloniki. It is furthermore maintained by specialists such as engineers and archaeologists of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the city of Thessaloniki.

## Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintenance primarily concerned with material wealth.

– No

Notes: The lead seals carrying names of bishops and other ecclesiastics discovered in the southwest corner of the west gallery suggest that this space was most probably used by the Church administration.

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

– No

## Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

– No

## Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

– No

Are there scriptures associated with this place:

– No

## Bibliography

### General References

Reference: S. Gerstel , C. Kyriakakis , K. Raptis , S. Antonopoulos , J. Donahue. "Soundscapes of Byzantium: The Acheiropoietos Basilica and the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki". *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, 87(1)

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Reference: *Byzantine Legacy Hagia Sophia (Thessaloniki)*

Reference: L. James *Thessaloniki, Hagia Sophia, dome mosaic*