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The Conversion of Churches into Mosques after the Conquest of Constantinople

Araştırma makalesi / *Research article*

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Abstract

This article examines the conversion of churches into mosques in Constantinople (Istanbul) following its conquest by the Ottoman Empire and explores the motivations behind these transformations. The recent reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque (in July 2020) has increased the interest in this historical practice of church conversion. This study argues that during the reign of Mehmed II, the primary motivation for converting churches was to address the religious needs of Muslim settlers and, as in the case of Hagia Sophia, to serve symbolic purposes rather than to demonstrate intolerance towards non-Muslims. However, once converted, these structures were incorporated into the Islamic waqf system, with strict provisions in waqfiyas (records) to preserve their form and function. The research primarily relies on waqf documents, while also drawing upon Ottoman and Byzantine historical chronicles to illuminate the atmosphere surrounding this period of transformation. Mehmed II's approach to religious freedom, including his appointment of leaders for the Christian and Jewish communities and the providing of new places for worship and residence, is also highlighted in the article. To show the real motivations behind church conversions, six converted churches were investigated within the context of Islamic conquest tradition and practices. These converted churches, which have survived to the present day, are evaluated within the understanding of interreligious heritage.

Keywords: Mehmed II, Church Conversion, Constantinople/Istanbul, Hagia Sophia, Interreligious Heritage.

İstanbul'un Fethinden Sonra Kiliselerin Camiye Dönüştürülmesi

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Öz

Bu makale, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun İstanbul'u fethinden sonra kiliselerin camiye dönüştürülmesini incelemekte ve bu dönüşümlerin ardındaki nedenleri araştırmaktadır. 2020 yılının temmuz ayında Ayasofya'nın yeniden camiye dönüştürülmesi, bu tarihi uygulamaya olan ilgiyi artırmıştır. Çalışma, II. Mehmed döneminde, kiliselerin camiye dönüştürülmesinin temel nedeninin, Müslüman olmayanlara karşı hoşgörüsüzlük değil, öncelikle Müslüman yerleşimcilerin dini ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak ve Ayasofya örneğinde olduğu gibi sembolik değerde olduğunu savunmaktadır. Ancak, dönüşümlerinin ardından bu yapılar vakıf sayılmış, şekil ve işlevlerinin devamlılığı vakfiyelerdeki hükümlerle koruma altına alınmıştır. Araştırmanın birincil kaynaklarını bu vakfiyeler oluşturmakla birlikte, dönüşümün yaşandığı dönemdeki atmosferi anlamak için Osmanlı ve Bizans tarihçilerinin kroniklerine de başvurulmuştur. Makalede II. Mehmed'in, Hıristiyan ve Yahudi cemaatlerine liderler ataması ve yeni ibadet ve ikamet yerleri sağlaması da dahil olmak üzere, din özgürlüğüne yaklaşımı da ele alınmıştır. Kiliselerin dönüştürülmesinin ardındaki gerçek motivasyonları anlamak için, İslam fetih gelenekleri ve uygulamaları bağlamında dönüştürülmüş altı kilise incelenmiştir. Dönüştürülen kiliselerin günümüze kadar ayakta kalan mabetler olması dinler arası miras çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: II. Mehmed, Kilise Dönüşümü, Konstantinopolis/İstanbul, Ayasofya, Dinlerarası Miras.

Introduction

Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, was respected by Muslims and Christians alike. Since the beginning of Islam, the city has captivated the Muslim world, with its conquest considered a significant goal. The first sieges on the city were carried out by Muslim armies under the Umayyads. The city was captivating for its historical significance as well as its strategic location and impressive architecture. Because the city was established as the capital of a Christian Empire, it has magnificent sanctuaries, chapels, and cathedrals.[1] It is claimed that owning the great city of Istanbul was considered a reason to believe that God had graced the Sultans.[2] During the Ottoman siege of the city, Sultan Mehmed II[3] aimed to avoid destroying the existing structures, particularly Hagia Sophia. He sent envoys to the Byzantine Emperor on several occasions to persuade him to surrender the city without engaging in a destructive war.[4] Nevertheless, the Christian Emperor Constantine XI Palaeologus did not accept this offer and declared that he would not leave the city until he died.[5]

After the conquest, Sultan Mehmed's primary concern was to repurpose the buildings situated between Hagia Sophia and the Golden Horn for educational and religious use by the new Muslim residents. Regarding this transformation activity, Finkel states that to turn Constantinople into Istanbul, it is not necessary to erase all the traces; instead, the Sultan tried to give new meaning to the past and changed the functions of both religious and civil Byzantine buildings.[6] Based on this point, Ergin also comments that many of the large mosques and public buildings in Istanbul formerly served as public squares or Byzantine churches, reflecting the transition of these public spaces under the new government.[7] Vryonis has also pointed to this subject. According to him, public places and their elements are common to the imperial iconography of Byzantine Constantinople and Ottoman Istanbul.[8]

Considering the architectural significance and the desire to preserve it with these buildings, one might wonder how it was possible to navigate the war, cultural shifts, and religious transformation. During the transition from Byzantine rule to Ottoman rule, there was a shift in the architectural focus of the city. While the Byzantines utilised public squares for grand ceremonies and entertainment, the Ottomans prioritised the construction of mosques and large courtyards for daily gatherings. This led to the transformation of existing buildings as well as the rapid construction of new ones. In addition to the symbolic

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1 Nigel Cawthorne, *History's Greatest Battles* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2007), 5.

2 Suraiya Faroqhi, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Tarihi*, trans. Ercan Ertürk (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2013),2.

3 In this paper the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II can be named in different ways, such as Mehmed II, Sultan Mehmed or Mehmed the Conqueror. In addition, special names in the article are given in modern Turkish. In the same way, Constantinople or Konstantiniyya for Istanbul were preferred in various statements.

4 Reşat Ekrem Koçu, *Fatih Sultan Mehmed* (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2015), passim.

5 Dukas, *Bizans Tarihi*, trans. Vladimir Mirmiroğlu, (İstanbul: İstanbul Matbaası, 1956),184.

6 Osman Ergin, *Türk Şehirlerinde İmaret Sistemi* (İstanbul, Cumhuriyet Matbaası, 1939),8.

7 Osman Ergin, *İstanbul'da İmar ve İskân Hareketleri* (İstanbul: Eminönü Halkevi Dil, Tarih ve Edebiyat Şubesi, 1938),16.

8 Speros Vryonis, "Byzantine Constantinople and Ottoman Istanbul: Evolution in a Millennial Imperial Iconography," in *The Ottoman City and Its Parts*, ed. Irene A. Bierman, Donald Preziosi, and Rifa'at A. Abou-El Haj, (New York, Aristide C. Caratzas, 1991), 22.

significance of this transformation, the Ottomans aimed to make the city more appealing to Muslims. It is evident from Mehmed II's early actions that he preferred to repurpose existing structures rather than completely rebuild the city.

This article explores the conversion of temples into mosques by the Ottomans in Constantinople after its conquest from a new perspective. Literature has well established that the conversion of Hagia Sophia carried both political and theological dimensions: it symbolized the completion of conquest and proclaimed the supremacy of Islam over Christianity. This article does not contest these interpretations. However, it argues that alongside these symbolic imperatives, a practical dimension — the need for Muslim congregational centers in a newly conquered city — has been insufficiently examined in existing scholarship. Even the conversion of Hagia Sophia, the most symbolically charged act of the conquest, cannot be fully understood without accounting for this functional dimension. This article aims to shed light on this underexplored perspective and contribute to the ongoing debate.This study will first examine the concept of conquest through contemporary studies. It will then analyse the conversion of churches to mosques from the perspective of Islamic conquest traditions. The second part will focus on six major churches transformed into mosques, exploring their historical significance and the reasons for their conversion. This study aims to contribute to our knowledge of how the Ottomans balanced practical necessities with religious and cultural imperatives in the early stages of their rule over this important city.

1. The Conversion of the Churches and The Islamic Tradition

The Islamic conquests impacted millions of lives, as Kennedy noted.[9] This statement can be expanded to encompass the extensive changes in urban structures, social dynamics, and even architectural practices that followed these conquests. A key question regarding Islamic expansions is based chiefly on their permanency, even though they were swift and far-reaching.[10] The enduring success of these conquests can largely be attributed to the settlement policies implemented by Islamic empires, distinguishing them from other rapid expansions such as those of the Mongols or Macedonians. Many historians have highlighted this aspect, viewing the spread of Islam as a remarkable achievement. Prominent Western historians like Goldziher (1910) and Pirenne (1935) linked the permanence of early Islamic conquests to the religious freedoms granted under Islamic rule in their famous works.

The motivations behind Muslim conquests remain a subject of debate. Some Western historians, such as Billington, have posited that the primary goal was religious conversion. In his work, he asserts that "The first and most important reason was the Muslim invasion, motivated by the Islamic justification of jihad, or 'holy war' as a valid means of gaining converts to their faith."[11] However, a detailed examination of post-conquest activities reveals that the primary objective of Muslim conquerors was not forcible conversion but rather the establishment of Islamic social and administrative systems in newly acquired territories. This approach often led to the conquered populations' gradual and voluntary acceptance of Islamic governance. Lombard argues that many inhabitants of lands brought under Islamic

[9] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live in* (London: Phoenix, 2008), 13.

[10] Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 366.

[11] Ray Billinton, *Understanding Eastern Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003),84.

rule viewed the new administration as liberators rather than oppressors. He emphasises that the victorious Muslim commanders were primarily concerned with establishing a fair tax system rather than imposing religious conversion on the populace.[12] This perspective challenges the notion of forced Islamisation often associated with Muslim conquests. Supporting this view, Lapidus contends that, contrary to popular belief, Muslims did not actively seek to convert conquered peoples to Islam.[13] Instead, the focus was creating a stable and inclusive social order that accommodated diverse religious communities under Islamic governance.

At this point, it is crucial to distinguish between Arabic and Turkish Islamic conquests in their administrative approaches. While Arab rulers often governed conquered territories like Khorasan and Mesopotamia from a distance, Turkish-Islamic states emphasised more direct local administration.[14] Despite these differences, both approaches prioritised establishing an Islamic social order that included non-Muslims, new converts (*mawālī*), and existing Muslims before focusing on widespread religious conversion.

The status of non-Muslim populations under Islamic rule and how they were integrated into the Islamic state without necessarily converting to Islam, has been discussed in the matter of conquest. Fayda clarifies this concept, stating that Islam "enabled non-Muslims to remain unconverted while still following Islamic governance and obeying Allah, without accepting Islam as their personal faith".[15] This perspective highlights the pragmatic approach of Islamic conquerors in establishing social and administrative structures that could accommodate diverse religious communities. But what were the rights of the conquerors according to Islamic law regarding whether they had the city with or without a war? This issue deserves further debate and careful consideration.

Conquering a city *sulhan* (peacefully) or *anwatan* (by force) is important for significant practical implications such as distributing the *ganimah*, taxes or the reconstruction process. According to Islamic law, the temples in the cities are taken by force; the conqueror has a right to convert them into Islamic structures. In Istanbul's case, some of the temples were transformed into mosques, *masjid*s, *madrasa*s or other Islamic structures. In contrast, other buildings were left in the hands of inhabitants and held their previous function. In addition, non-Muslims were given security of property, life, and religion, and even a leader was appointed to communities that did not have a leader.[16]

Reports on whether the Ottoman army seized the city peacefully or by force are complicated. In his famous book *History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire* from the 1700s, voivode of Moldavia Demetrius Cantemir stated that the Sultan and the Emperor had agreed on the delivery of the city, but then this agreement was broken due to an incident that occurred as a result of a misunderstanding.[17] Although Cantemir's claim needs further investigation, this narration is close to Sultan Mehmed's well-known policy of

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12 Maurice Lombard, *İlk Zafer Yıllarında İslam* (İstanbul: Pınar Yayınları, 1983),15–16.

13 Ira M. Lapidus, *İslam Toplumları Tarihi* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2016),84.

14 Lapidus, *İslam Toplumları Tarihi*, 85.

15 Mustafa Fayda, "Fetih", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 1995), 12/469.

16 "Gennadios II Scholarios," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, July 20, 1998, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gennadios-II-Scholarios.

17 Demetrius Cantemir, *History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire* (London: James, John, and Paul Knapton, 1734) ,201–202.

taking the city without war. However, reports on this debate show that the Byzantine Emperor did not agree to leave the city without any trial, as Dukas clearly states.[18] The siege culminated with Ottoman forces breaching the city's sea walls. According to accounts, while these troops entered the city, those besieging the land walls raised their flag, signalling the city's capitulation. In response, the Sultan issued a decree guaranteeing certain rights to the inhabitants.[19]

A relevant question regarding the conquest of Constantinople is the extent of damage inflicted on the city's structures during the siege, battle, and subsequent looting. It is asserted that the city suffered less damage than one might expect, given the prolonged siege and three days of pillaging.[20] This relative preservation can be attributed to Sultan Mehmed II's strict orders against damaging the city's infrastructure. Dukas provides an anecdote illustrating the Sultan's commitment to preserving the city's architectural heritage. He recounts that upon entering Hagia Sophia after the conquest, Mehmed II harshly reproached a Turkish soldier caught damaging one of the temple's marble elements. This incident underscores the Sultan's personal interest in safeguarding the city's monuments. Mehmed II's famous edict declared: "Assets and captives are enough for you; the buildings of the city belong to me".[21] This proclamation effectively established the Sultan's ownership and protection over the city's structures. Zinkeisen also notes that this decree was instrumental in saving numerous magnificent buildings from destruction, including Hagia Sophia, which was considered the peak of Byzantine architectural achievement.[22]

Inalcik notes that despite his reluctance to allow plundering, Sultan Mehmed II was obliged to honour his promise to his soldiers, permitting three days of looting. However, the Sultan immediately initiated efforts to conserve and restore the city.[23] This approach aligns with the view, acknowledged even in some Western scholarship, that Mehmed II sought to expand and enhance Constantinople rather than completely replace it.[24] To this end, the Sultan's first actions included ordering repairs to the Byzantine city walls and repurposing functional structures to meet immediate needs. Many temples were converted into mosques to serve the new Muslim population. Interestingly, while the Ottomans repurposed religious buildings, they generally did not occupy Byzantine palaces; instead, they used their locations and ruins for new construction. It is important to note that the vast majority of temples in the city were churches, reflecting Byzantium's status as a Christian empire. While there was a small Jewish population, significant religious structures were predominantly churches and monasteries, not synagogues. Consequently, there are no recorded instances of synagogues being converted into mosques following the conquest.

The survival of numerous historical churches in Istanbul challenges some of the claims made in Ottoman chronicles regarding the number of churches demolished or converted into mosques. It appears that these numbers were often exaggerated to emphasise the power

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18 Dukas, *Bizans Tarihi*, 184.

19 Feridun Emecen, *İstanbul'un Fethi Olayı ve Meseleleri* (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2003),46–47.

20 Johann Wilhelm Zinkeisen, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Tarihi*, ed. Erhan Afyoncu, trans. Nilüfer Epçeli, (İstanbul: Yeditepe, 2011), 3.

21 Dukas, *Bizans Tarihi*, 184.

22 Zinkeisen, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Tarihi*, 4.

23 Halil İnalcık, "Fatih Sultan Mehmed Tarafından İstanbul'un Yeniden İnşası", *19 Mayıs Üniversitesi Dergisi*, 3 (1988), 126.

24 David Jacob, *Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire* (London: Cassell, 1969),123.

and influence of the conquerors. For instance, Hoca Sâdeddin Efendi reported that over a hundred churches were transformed into mosques during Sultan Mehmed II's reign.[25] However, archaeological and historical evidence suggests this figure may be exaggerated. On the other hand, the policy of church conversion evolved over time. During the reign of Bayezid II, there was a more comprehensive effort to convert vacant churches into mosques. In the early Ottoman period, the construction of new churches was generally prohibited. However, by the 18th century, this policy had changed, and new church construction was permitted.[26]

The Wakfiyah of Mehmed II provides a well-documented account of church conversions in the early Ottoman period of Istanbul. According to this source, six churches were initially converted into mosques: Hagia Sophia, Zeyrek Mosque (formerly the Pantokrator Monastery), a church known as Mesadomenko in Galata, a church within the Silivri Castle, The Old Imaret Church, Kalenderhane Mosque (formerly the Church of Theotokos Kyriotissa).[27] This official record suggests a more modest scale of conversion than some later chronicles imply. However, it is possible that smaller churches or those converted later were not included in this document. For instance, mosques such as Vefa Church Mosque, Mustafa Çavuş Mosque, and Sancaktar Mosque may have been omitted due to their size or because their conversion occurred after the wakfiyah was written. Accounting for these additional conversions, it would appear that nine churches were fully transformed into mosques during this early period of Ottoman rule. This number aligns more closely with the physical evidence and provides a more realistic picture of the initial phase of religious building conversion in Ottoman Istanbul.

After the conquest of Istanbul, Mehmed II wanted to promote the prosperity and repopulation of the city. As part of this effort, a building complex consisting of pious foundations (a theological college, a school, and a public kitchen grouped around a mosque) and some commercial buildings were established. The needs of the people shaped these building activities.[28] Prayer and ablution are important duties of the Muslim people, so mosques and buildings complementary to the mosque were given high priority. The Muslim population needed houses, mosques, bazaars, etc., for their daily life in the newly conquered city. The settlement process, discussed by Lowry, was based on the voluntary movement of particular groups in the city, mostly based on community. New arrivals designate the mosque's name, which served as their place of worship, indicating their community.[29] Mosques were quickly converted from existing buildings without waiting for new ones to be

[25] Hoca Sâdeddin, *Tacü't-Tevârîh* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1979), 293.

[26] Levent Öztürk, "Kilise: İslam Tarihi", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2002), 25/16.

[27] "Ebu'l-Feth Sultan Mehmed Han Vakfiyesi (Ayasofya Vakfiyesi)" Tapu ve Kadastro Genel Müdürlüğü Arşivi, 1463, 7, https://mk.gov.tr/GalleryFiles/250/ayasofya_vakfiyesi_defter-35339641-a0db-42de-a761-8fa0a28d5c32.pdf.

[28] Halil İnalcık, "The Policy of Mehmed II toward the Greek Population of Istanbul and the Byzantine Buildings of the City," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 23/24 (1969/1970), 235.

[29] Heath W. Lowry, "From Lesser Wars to the Mightiest War. The Ottoman Conquest and Transformation of Byzantine Urban Centers in the Fifteenth Century," in *Continuity and Change in Late Byzantine and Early Ottoman Society*, ed. Anthony Bryer and Heath W. Lowry (Birmingham and Washington DC: University of Birmingham and Dumbarton Oaks, 1986),326.

built. During Bayezid II's reign, there was a rivalry among state officials to turn Byzantine religious structures in various parts of the city into Islamic places of worship.

It is also important to note that after the conquest of Constantinople, Mehmed II appointed leaders to various religious communities: patriarchs to the Orthodox and Armenian communities and rabbis to the Jewish community. The first of these appointments was Gennadios as Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church in January 1454, restoring him and his church to all their former rights. In 1461, an Armenian bishop from Bursa, Yohakim, was appointed Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople. Similarly, according to the Jewish chronicler Eliyahu Kapsali, Mehmed the Conqueror appointed Moshe Kapsali, a rabbi from Constantinople, as "kadi and rabbi of the Jews".[30] Mehmed II's appointments of religious leaders following the conquest of Constantinople highlight a remarkable level of tolerance and respect for the city's diverse religious communities.

This study turns now to the six principal buildings converted from churches to mosques in the immediate aftermath of Constantinople's conquest, as documented in the Hagia Sophia Wakfiyyah. These conversions offer crucial insights into Sultan Mehmed II's religious policy, which balanced establishing Islamic institutions with a degree of tolerance for the existing Christian population.

2. Main Temples Converted into Mosques and Their Function

This section examines the first converted mosques in Ottoman Istanbul: Hagia Sophia, Eski Imaret, Kalenderhane, Molla Gürani, Zeyrek and Arab Mosque. By analyzing their function, location, and significance before and after the conquest, I aim to demonstrate that the primary motivation for their conversion was pragmatic necessity, at least in the initial years following the Ottoman takeover.

Hagia Sophia, as the most prominent example, merits special attention. Throughout Byzantine history, it served as the Empire's religious and ceremonial center, hosting imperial coronations and victory celebrations, and providing sanctuary purposes. However, Hagia Sophia's history was marked by periods of destruction and decline. The iconoclasm period (726-842) saw the removal of religious images, while the Latin Occupation of 1204 resulted in significant damage and looting, including the removal of its ornate gates.[31] Unfortunately, financial constraints in Byzantium's final years prevented proper maintenance and restoration.

For this reason, Hagia Sophia lost its beauty in time. Hagia Sophia could not be repaired after the destruction and looting due to financial impossibilities in the last periods of Byzantium. The biggest temple of Christianity became a great temple of Islam after the conquest of Istanbul. The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 marked a turning point for Hagia Sophia. Its conversion to a mosque under Mehmed II's orders reflected both practical needs and symbolic importance. This transformation allowed the building to regain much of its former glory through Ottoman restoration and adaptation.

After a conquest, a mosque is typically constructed, or an existing building is converted into a mosque and opened for worship, often starting with the first Friday prayer. This act is

[30] Gilles Veinstein, "Fetihten Sonraki Osmanlı Millet Sistemi Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler", *I. Uluslararası İstanbul'un Fethi Sempozyumu*, (1996) 137.

[31] Eremya Çelebi Kömürciyan, *İstanbul Tarihi*, trans. Hrand D. Andreasyan (İstanbul: Eren Matbaacılık, 1988),4.

seen as a symbol of freedom and the conqueror's dominance.[32] During the Friday prayer, the Sultan or a designated representative delivers a sermon, offering prayers for the Muslims and mentioning the conqueror's name, state, and nation. [33] The conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque holds significant political importance as it symbolises the Muslims' conquest of the city. Ortaylı points out that Hagia Sophia's conversion is significant because no building in Western Europe, not even in Renaissance Italy, matched its allure. Until the grand churches of Europe were constructed, Hagia Sophia was esteemed by all Christians.[34] Sultan Mehmed himself emphasised this importance with the following words:

> "One of the places allocated to this charity is the exquisite church located in the town of Konstantiniyye, located near Kal'a-i Sultaniye-i Cedide (Yeni Saray), allocated for the reign and named Hagia Sophia."[35]

Since converting the most important temple of the Empire into a mosque has been regarded as the absolute conquest of Constantinople, Tursun Bey has devoted a chapter to this event in his book, even though he has not mentioned other churches converted into mosques. He explained the visit of Sultan Mehmed to Hagia Sophia with the following words in Ottoman Turkish:

> Ol mısr-ı kadimün ve ol kal'a-i vesi'un tabakât-ı büyûtâtın ve berzen ü esvâkın temâşâ idüp seyriderek, Ayasofya nâm kelisâyı- ki cennetten bir âyettür- görmeğe ragbet gösterdi.
>
> Pâdişah-ı cihân bunun sath-ı muka"arında olan acâyüb ü gârayib san'atlerin ve temâsilin temâşâ ittükten sonra, sath-ı muhaddebine urûc buyurdu; Rûhu'llah tabaka-i çârmin-i âsümâne ûrûc eder gibi tasa"ud itti. Esnâ-yı tabakâtında olan divarları küngürelerinden ferş-i derya mevcin temâşâ iderek kubbe üzerine çıktı.
>
> Kaçan kim pâdişâh-ı âlem ilm-i küll ile bu binânun hakikatine vakıf oldı, bâki cüziyyatına mukayyed olmayup, el ehem diyüp, semend-i zafer-yâbını ordu-yı hümâyuna müteveccih buyurdık.[36]

To summarise this statement, after conquering Constantinople, Sultan Mehmed II visited Hagia Sophia, observing its neglected condition. Tursun Bey recounts that the Sultan recited a Persian couplet after reaching the dome, lamenting the neglect of once-great cities.[37] This moment highlights Mehmed II's appreciation for the building's historical significance. Recognising Hagia Sophia's importance, Mehmed II prevented its destruction and performed the first Islamic prayer there, symbolising its new role.[38] He then designated it as the first building of his waqf and ordered the construction of a madrasah behind it. However, the full conversion and renovation of Hagia Sophia was a gradual process. This measured

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32 Aşıkpaşazade, *Tevārih-i Āl-i Osmān* (İstanbul: MAS Matbaası, 2003),218.

33 Hüseyin Algül, "Fetihten Sonra İstanbul'un İmar ve İskânı," *Diyanet İlmi Dergi*, 4 (1997), 20.

34 İlber Ortaylı, *Osmanlı'yı Yeniden Keşfetmek* (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2007),66.

35 Ahmet Akgündüz-Said Öztürk-Yaşar Baş, "Ayasofya Vakfiyesi" *Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf Üniversitesi Bülteni*, 9 (2014), 29-183.

36 Tursun Bey, *Tarih-i Ebu'l Feth* (İstanbul, İstanbul Fetih Cemiyeti, 1977),63–65.

37 "Perde-dâri mi guned der tâk-i Kisrâ ankebût / Bûm-i nevbet mi zened der kal'a-ı Efrâsiyâb" which means *'The Spider has woven her web in the imperial palace / The Owl has sung her watch song upon the towers of Efrasiyab.*' On this, see. Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965),149.

38 Dukas, *Bizans Tarihi*, 184.

approach allowed for the preservation of much of the building's original character while adapting it to its new function as a mosque.

Hagia Sophia assumed the role of a grand mosque in Ottoman Istanbul, mirroring the central mosques in other early Turkish cities. Immediately following the conquest, Mehmed II prioritised its maintenance and repair, allocating revenue from various commercial properties to support Hagia Sophia and other significant complexes.[39] Firstly, former priest rooms were converted into madrasas, and well-known scholars like Molla Husrev and Ali Kuşçu were appointed to lead and teach there. Until 1471, this was Istanbul's sole Ottoman madrasa, highlighting its educational significance in the early post-conquest period. However, the opening of the Semaniye madrasas in 1471 diminished the need for Hagia Sophia's educational facilities. Consequently, the 1479 Fatih Wakfiyah omitted mentions of the madrasa's staff and expenses.[40] After the completion of the Semaniye *madrasa*s, the need for this *madrasa* decreased, and education was gathered in one centre, which was abandoned for a while. For this reason, the duties and expenses of the staff in the madrasah were not included in the *Fatih Wakfiyah*, which was issued in 1479. These developments illustrate how Mehmed II's policies transformed Hagia Sophia into a central institution of Islamic learning and worship while also adapting to the changing needs of the growing Ottoman capital.[41]

The conversion of Hagia Sophia went beyond a simple transformation from church to mosque. It became the cornerstone of Istanbul's Islamisation, exemplifying the Ottoman approach to reshaping conquered cities. Mehmed II's vision extended Hagia Sophia's role beyond a place of worship, establishing it as an educational and cultural hub through the addition of madrasas, libraries, and a comprehensive waqf. Recognising Hagia Sophia's critical role, Mehmed II instituted strict provisions in its wakfiyah to ensure its preservation and continued function. The document emphatically states that the conditions set forth are immutable, the building's purpose cannot be altered, and any attempt to change or abolish the foundation would incur divine wrath.[42] This approach reflects Mehmed II's strategy of using Hagia Sophia as the focal point for reconstructing and reimagining Constantinople as an Ottoman capital. While symbolically important for Muslims as a conquest achievement, its practical function as a religious, cultural, and educational centre was equally significant.

The second church in this conversion process was the Eski (Old) Imaret (Imaret-i Atik Mosque). This church was a part of Pantepoptes Monastery dedicated to "Jesus the all-seeing".[43] In the *waqfiyyah* of Fatih its name is written as a converted temple and its description is given as: "*Biri dahi Eski İmâret tesmiye olunca kenisedir, bu dahi Dârüssaltanati'l aliyye mahmiyye-i Konstantiniyye'de dâhilinde Eski İmâret ismiyle mevsume olan mahalde vâkidir; şarkan taraf-ı saltanat için ihlâ ve ibka olunan arz-ı hâliye, kıbleten ve şimâlen Eski İmâret odaları demekle mâruf hücurât ve garben hücurât-ı mezkûre*

[39] Ahmet Akgündüz et al., *Üç Devirde Bir Mabed* (İstanbul: Osmanlı Araştırmaları Vakfı, 2005),245.

[40] Cahid Baltacı, *XV-XVI. Yüzyıllarda Osmanlı Medreseleri* (İstanbul: İFAV, 2005),752.

[41] Akgündüz et al., *Üç Devirde Bir Mabed*, 241–242.

[42] Akgündüz, "Ayasofya Vakfiyesi"; "Ebu'l-Feth Sultan Mehmed Han Vakfiyesi (Ayasofya Vakfiyesi)"; Semavi Eyice, *Ayasofya* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1984); Semavi Eyice, "Ayasofya" *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*. Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 1991. 4/206-210.

[43] Semavi Eyice, "Eski İmâret Camii", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 1995), 11/391.

beyninde vâki sahn-ı hâliye müntehidir."[44] The description states that one of the converted buildings is the church named Old Imaret, which is located in the place named Old Imaret within the *Dar al-saltanat al-aliyyah mahmiyyah Konstantiniyya*. In addition, some details are given to locate the building and describe the parts of the building.

The Eski Imaret Mosque represents the second significant church conversion in Ottoman Istanbul. Its inclusion in Mehmed II's wakfiyyah emphasises its importance in the early Ottoman period. [45] There is a detailed description in wakfiyyah, which identifies the building and provides insight into its surroundings and the urban fabric of early Ottoman Istanbul.[46] The conversion of this church, along with its renaming and repurposing, exemplifies Mehmed II's broader strategy of adaptive reuse in the conquered city. The transformation of the Pantepoptes Monastery into the Eski Imaret Mosque again reflects the Ottoman approach of balancing pragmatic needs with respect for existing structures. By maintaining the building's core while adapting its function, Mehmed II demonstrated a policy of gradual transformation rather than extensive replacement.

The wakfiyah confirms that the Byzantine Pantepoptes Church was converted into a mosque during Sultan Mehmed II's reign. This transformation occurred after the construction of the Fatih Complex, with the church becoming a mosque and its ancillary structures repurposed as madrasas and an imaret (multi-purpose charitable complex, often serving as a soup kitchen). This conversion exemplifies Mehmed II's policy of adaptive reuse, where existing Byzantine structures were repurposed to serve the needs of the new Ottoman administration and the Muslim population. Despite its historical significance as one of Mehmed II's early foundations in Istanbul, the Eski Imaret Mosque has not been well-preserved over the centuries. While the mosque itself remains open for prayer, the adjacent madrasa rooms have been destroyed. This decline reflects the changing priorities and urban dynamics of Istanbul in the centuries following the conquest.[47]

The Kalenderhane Mosque, the third major conversion after the conquest, presents a complex case for understanding Mehmed II's religious policy. Its unusual situation has sparked scholarly debate. Ayverdi, based on Mehmed II's wakfiyah, states that the building, converted from the Christ Acataliptos monastery, was endowed "for the poor and the helpless people".[48] The allocation to Kalenderi dervishes, if accurate, raises questions about Mehmed II's motivations. Ottoman sources, such as Aşıkpaşazade, mention that many sheikhs, dervishes, abdals, young and older people arrived in Diyar-ı Rum.[49] After the conquest of Istanbul, the ruler awarded Byzantine churches to these groups in recognition of their support for the Ottoman army.[50] Mehmed II's attitude can be connected to the efforts of Kalenderi dervishes in the conquest of Istanbul. However, there are also comments suggesting that the Kalenderis, a group known for creating anarchy within the state, were housed in a building as a way to control them.[51]

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44 Akgündüz, "Ayasofya Vakfiyesi".
45 Eyice, "Eski İmâret Camii", 11/391.
46 Akgündüz, "Ayasofya Vakfiyesi".
47 Ekrem Hakkı Ayverdi, *Fatih Devri Mimarisi* (İstanbul: Fetih Derneği Neşriyatı, 1953),14.
48 Ayverdi, *Fatih Devri Mimarisi,*17.
49 Aşıkpaşazade, *Tevârih-i Âl-i Osmân*, 298.
50 Ergin, *Türk Şehirlerinde İmaret Sistemi*, 26–27.
51 Nejat Göyünç, "Kalenderhâne Cami" *Tarih Dergisi,* 34 (1984) 485–494.

According to Eyice, the monastery's rooms for monks served as a lodge. For this reason, Kalenderhane is considered the first dervish lodge after the conquest of Istanbul.[52] Kalenderhane Complex was used as a monastery before the conquest, and its condition was good during the conquest. And the church, which is one of the most magnificent churches in Istanbul, was preserved, especially with its marble covering. It is stated in the foundation of Fatih that this church was dedicated as a lodge. Kalenderhane is an excellent example in terms of understanding how the Byzantine structures that remained in good condition after the conquest were used and the Sultan's policy for settlement and control of new resident groups.[53]

The Vefa Church Mosque, originally the Byzantine Hagia Teodoros church, represents the fourth significant conversion in early Ottoman Istanbul. Also known as Molla Gürâni Mosque, it was transformed by Molla Gürâni, a prominent scholar during Mehmed II's reign. Molla Gürâni, who served as kazasker (military judge) from 1451, was a key advisor to Mehmed II during the conquest of Constantinople. He participated in the siege and encouraged the Sultan during critical moments. After the conquest, Molla Gürâni established two mosques and other buildings in Istanbul, endowing them with various properties.[54] Located in the Vefa district, one of the first residential areas in Suriçi Istanbul, the mosque's establishment likely addressed the needs of newly settled Muslims. This conversion exemplifies Mehmed II's pragmatic approach to repurposing Byzantine structures for the growing Muslim population while rewarding key figures who supported the conquest.

The Zeyrek Church Mosque, originally the Pantokrator Church, was the fifth major conversion and the second-largest Byzantine temple after Hagia Sophia to survive the conquest.[55] This complex, part of the renowned Middle Byzantine Pantokrator Monastery, comprised three churches dedicated to Jesus Pantocrator, Mary, and Archangel Michael. Mehmed II's wakfiyah clearly outlines the building's new purpose: "One of them is also known as Mevlana Zeyrek, who is one of my scholars in Istanbul, and I hope the neighbourhood will be known as Molla Zeyrek District, and the mosque as Zeyrek Mosque."[56] The triple church of the Pantocrator Monastery was known by the name of Molla Zeyrek Mehmed Efendi, who was the teacher/scholar in the madrasa, and the cells were very functional, as well as the mosque at first. However, the madrasa cells lost their value and disappeared in time after the Fatih Complex was built. The Zeyrek Mosque, which still functions as a mosque today, is located in the historical peninsula Eminönü, in the district of Zeyrek named after it.[57]

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52 Semavi Eyice, "Kalenderhâne Camii", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2001), 24/251-252.

53 Eyice, "Kalenderhâne Cami", 24/251

54 M. Kâmil Yaşaroğlu, "Molla Gürânî", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2005), 30/249-250.

55 Nursel Gülenaz and İnci Tüysüz, *Adım Adım İstanbul'un Tarihi Yarımadası Zeyrek Fatih* (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2010), 11.

56 *Fatih Mehmed II Vakfiyeleri* (Ankara: Vakıflar Umûm Müdürlüğü Neşriyatı, 1938), 202.

57 Semavi Eyice, "Zeyrek Kilise Cami" *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, 1994, 555.

The last one is the Arab Mosque, the largest mosque on the Galata.[58] The Arab Mosque has a complex history that exemplifies the layered religious landscape of Istanbul. While legends attribute its origins to the Umayyad siege of 716-717,[59] it is known that the Umayyad army commanded by Maslama b. Abd al-malik besieged Istanbul for seven years. If one considers the possibility appeasing the army for fear of a siege or the army needing a prayer space for an extended period, there could be a masjid in Galata. However, it is doubtful that this masjid could be the current Arab Mosque. The inscription, however, on a marble stone placed on the wall by Hacı Emin Efendi mentions the name of Mesleme b. Abd al-malik as the first builder of the mosque.[60]

According to Eyice, although the Arabs surrounded the city of Istanbul, they did not have a mosque there. Even though Muslims who came to Byzantium were allowed to build a mosque in accordance with the agreements made with the Emperor, it is known that this masjid was not inside the city walls but outside. Moreover, it was neglected and then restored as a result of the political situation between Muslims and Christians. In any case, it seems impossible for a mosque to survive after the Arab army.[61] Ibn-i Esir states that the mosque was repaired in the eleventh century as a result of a request to the Byzantine Empire.[62] This information clearly shows that there was a masjid or a mosque before the conquest of Istanbul.

Eyice argues there was a Byzantine church on the site of the the Arab Mosque, because there are some ruined walls. The view that the church is in the name of Aya Eirene is based only on an estimation of these Byzantine ruins. A church was built by the Latins in the 8th century when Galata was under the administration of Genoa, in the name of San Paolo. Furthermore, during the Latin rule, around 1233, the monastery was established by the Dominican sect adjacent to the Church of San Paolo. The church that was repaired in 1407 became the Church of San Domenico; he was the head of the sect, and both names were used together as "San Paolo e San Domenico".

If the tradition of converting the largest church into a mosque after the conquest was also applied in Galata, the view that the church called Mesa Domenico in Turkish sources was converted into a mosque with the name Galata Mosque would be strengthened. As stated in the wakfiyah, this church was built directly as a mosque in the Fatih foundations. Following the end of the Andalusian Islamic State in Spain in 1492, the Andalusian Arabs who emigrated from Spain settled around this mosque. Thus, it is possible that the legend about the establishment by Muslim Arabs before the conquest emerged at that time..[63]

Consequently, Muslim Arabs who besieged Istanbul in the 8th century may have built a mosque here, but this mosque was likely later converted into a church. After the conquest of Istanbul, it is clear that a church of the same size was converted into a mosque in Galata,

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58 For more information on the architectural elements and their importance, see Işık, H. Sabri. *Arap Cami ve Galata*. İstanbul: Erkam Matbaası, 2000.

59 Semavi Eyice, "Arap Cami" *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, 1994, 294.

60 Semavi Eyice, "Arap Camii", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 1991), 3/327.

61 Eyice, "Arap Cami", *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, 114.

62 Safir Akhdar, "İstanbul: Roma Metropollüğünden Dâru'l-Hilafet'e", *Uluslararası İstanbul'un Fethi Sempozyumu* (İstanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 1996),114.

63 Eyice, "Arap Camii", 294.

according to the information obtained from the *waqf* records. Thus, the Arab Mosque can be mentioned among the most interesting examples of converted churches as it continually shifts between Muslim and Christian owners who lived in Galata in different centuries.

Conclusion

The fate of Constantinople's churches after the conquest of 1453 cannot be explained by a single factor. Mehmed II inherited a city shaped by centuries of Byzantine Christian tradition, and the policies adopted toward churches reflected the complex conditions of a newly conquered capital. As this article has shown, the conversion of churches was not driven by a uniform program of Islamisation. Instead, it resulted from a combination of demographic pressures, practical administrative needs, symbolic considerations, and the legal framework of conquest in Islamic law.

The examples examined in this study demonstrate that conversions followed a selective rather than systematic way. Ottoman authorities focused primarily on large and centrally located churches, while allowing many smaller ones to remain in Christian use. This way indicates that the immediate concern after the conquest was to establish sufficient spaces for the growing Muslim population. At the same time, the city's urban fabric remained largely Byzantine. The Ottoman administration therefore approached the issue with a pragmatic strategy that balanced symbolic authority with practical needs—an aspect that has not always been sufficiently emphasized in the existing literature.

At the same time, this article does not seek to minimise the symbolic dimensions of church conversion, particularly in the case of Hagia Sophia. The transformation of the city's most prominent ecclesiastical monument carried unambiguous political and theological significance: it constituted a public affirmation of Ottoman sovereignty, legitimised Mehmed II's imperial claims, and marked the definitive transition from Byzantine to Ottoman rule. These symbolic functions were real and consequential. The argument advanced here is not that pragmatic considerations superseded symbolic ones, but rather that both dimensions operated simultaneously and that an exclusive focus on either produces an incomplete account of a wide-ranging policy.

Finally, for further research, the Quranic verse from Surah Al-Hajj (22/40) offers a framework through which the Ottoman practice of conversion, as distinct from demolition, may be reconsidered.[64] When a church was transformed into a mosque rather than razed, the structure continued to function as a space of religious observance, a continuity that is not without theological resonance. This dimension of the conversion process has received limited attention in existing scholarship and hence may deserve further investigation.

[64] "Had Allah not repelled some people by means of others, destruction would have surely claimed monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which Allah's Name is often mentioned." See Levent Öztürk, "Kur'ân'a Göre (Hac 22/40) Hristiyan Mabetlerine Gösterilmesi Gereken Saygı", *Sakarya Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* (2002) 71-86.

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