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# The Monuments We Privilege, or, How to Write an Ethical History of Byzantium

Roland Betancourt

In January 532 CE, the Nika Riots burned through much of Constantinople. In just five days, the violence decimated many of the city's monuments, even destroying the original Church of Hagia Sophia. As the violence escalated, imperial officials, along with Emperor Justinian, considered fleeing. After much deliberation and consultations with the generals, it appears that a ruse was devised to corral all dissenters by calling a meeting in the Hippodrome. Once they had congregated, imperial soldiers surrounded the people and systematically slaughtered all those who had gathered there. The court historian, Prokopios, who recounts these events in his book on Justinian's Wars (1.24) states that more than thirty thousand people died there that day, a number that, if true, modern historians believe would have accounted for at least ten percent of the city's population.<sup>1</sup>

It was in these ashes that the Hagia Sophia we know today was built. In fact, construction for the new church began only six weeks after the destruction of its predecessor.<sup>2</sup> This radical building campaign served not only as a testament to Justinian's might, but also helped to readily purge the urban landscape of all traces of the uprising that had scarred the city and threatened his rulership. While Prokopios attacks the rioters for being "unholy wretches" (*ἀποφράδες τὰ ὄπλα*) that set fire to a church, he then goes on to say that Justinian would build such a fine edifice that any Christian who had been shown the new Hagia Sophia before would have prayed for the old one to be swiftly destroyed so that the new one could be built.<sup>3</sup> Basically, Prokopios rewrites the rioters' destruction as a fortuitous act of providence, emboldening Justinian's Hagia Sophia for the sake of its aesthetic beauty, architectural complexity, and lavish patronage.

In many ways, we continue to teach the same propagandistic view of Hagia Sophia provided to us by Prokopios. Culling from Prokopios's meticulous account of the construction, art historical surveys detail with narrative intrigue the various struggles faced by the builders and the marvels of Anthemios of Tralles and Isidoros of Miletos's design and engineering. Yet, we all too easily forget the thirty thousand citizens of Constantinople violently assassinated by Justinian's army in the Hippodrome. And, we all too easily overlook the ways in which Hagia Sophia is not simply a byproduct of the Nika Riots' rampage, but rather, a reassertion of imperial dominance over the city's populace during a period in which Justinian's rule faced much criticism for its brutal policies and practices. We are left to wonder how many people in attendance at the new church's consecration, just a mere six years after the riot, had lost a loved one at the Hippodrome that day. Now, the skyline of Constantinople would be dominated by a poignant reminder of the riot and the lives lost, a fact that is easy to forget when we look at the building today.

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1 Prokopios, *Wars* (1.24), ed. and trans. H.B. Dewing, *History of the Wars*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 218–239. On the number of dead, see Geoffrey Greatrex, "The Nika Riot: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117 (1997): 60–86, at 79, n. 98. Elements of the uprising's narrative are also preserved in the chronicle of John Malalas and the so-called Paschal Chronicle, see Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, and Roger Scott, trans., *The Chronicle of John Malalas* (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986); and, Michael Whitby and Mark Whitby, eds. and trans., *Chronicon Paschale, 284–628 AD* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1990).

2 See Robert Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 201.

3 Prokopios, *On Buildings* (1.1), ed. and trans., H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 10–11.

The elimination of Confederate monuments in the United States and the removal of statues of slave traders and colonizers across the world urges us to seriously consider the monuments we privilege in our historical accounts. To affirm that Black Lives Matter is also to affirm the long and deeply imbricated legacies of state-sponsored violence and systemic racism in our past and its histories. From Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980) to Nikole Hannah-Jones's *The 1619 Project* (2019), scholars have sought to present familiar histories through the untold perspectives of the peoples who defined that history and whose importance and centrality has been denied by the normative retellings.<sup>4</sup> This erasure can often be attributed to some combination of the so-called "great man" model of history that centralizes historical action on discreet individuals and to various forms of material and economic determinism that work, for instance, to reduce the entire history of slavery to economic interests and to fervently deny the development of modern racism in the justification of chattel slavery.

Similar patterns can easily be seen at work in our historical depictions of Hagia Sophia, caught between the agency of Justinian and the aesthetic lavishness of its construction. The rationale for teaching it in our survey courses is that it either presents the greatest monument of Justinian's rule or presents an incomparable masterpiece of Byzantine art and architecture, which due to its innovation and quality cannot be ignored. My proposition here, however, is not simply that we "cancel" Hagia Sophia. That is to say, that due to its conditions of construction it should be struck and removed from the art historical canon as a sort of *damnatio memoriae*. This would merely withhold and deny Hagia Sophia, while still promoting and upholding the canon and histories that have given it such a powerful place, despite its deep and longstanding complicities with imperial brutality. Instead, my proposition here is that we dare to write a history of Byzantine art and architecture that does not prescribe Hagia Sophia any magnanimity whatsoever to begin with; one that ascribes to it a minor, background role at most in a richer and more complex history of Byzantium.

What would this history look like then? What monuments would such a history privilege? Perhaps, this history of Byzantium would seek out a narrative for art and architecture that foregrounds non-elite peoples and their daily lives, much as is exemplified in Sharon Gerstel's *Rural Lives and Landscapes in Late Byzantium*.<sup>5</sup> Or, perhaps, it places at the center the histories of marginalized people, focusing on the ways in which gender variance, non-normative sexualities, and complex processes of racial thinking existed across the long history of Byzantium, as I do in my book *Byzantine Intersectionality*.<sup>6</sup> Programmatic models such as these would allow us to anchor our narratives in themes and ideas that would produce oblique threads of historical development over time, shining a light on different sets of evidence, texts, sites, and artworks—or, at least, provide us an unorthodox look at familiar monuments.

For example, what would it look like to write a history of Byzantium that privileges the vibrancy of human experience, showcasing not achievements in military conquests and buildings, but in the diversity of its people and its society?

What I am proposing here is to write *an ethical history of Byzantium*, a historical narrative that privileges moments of social diversity and complexity. From there, we could then go on to seek out the art and architecture *in service* of this diversity, removed from strictures of normative understandings of technical skill, stylistic conformity, or material expense, eschewing notions of architectural innovation or artistic genius. Therefore, rather than showcasing a frontispiece acclaiming the patronage and charity of an emperor, we would

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4 See Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1942–Present* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); Nikole Hannah-Jones, et al., "The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine* (August 2019).

5 Sharon Gerstel, *Rural Lives and Landscapes in Late Byzantium: Art, Archaeology, and Ethnography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

6 Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

highlight miniatures and marginalia that represent gender-variant saints, non-normative sexualities, or those that subvert socio-economic hierarchies, critique abuses of power, or champion the lives of the oppressed.

### The Ethics of Hagia Sophia, Reconsidering the Nika Uprising

Here, I want to take the opportunity to think through the problematics of Justinian's Hagia Sophia, its place in the history of civil unrest, and how we might think of a different narrative for Byzantine art history, one that actively works against the glorification of oppression and towards emancipation.

The rule of Justinian and Theodora presents an important example of how *not* to write a history of art. Contemplating Justinian in the era of Trumpism, it was quickly impressed upon me that if we write histories that only privilege rulers that built tall buildings covered in gold, we would have a very skewed and dystopian vision of history that would in no way represent the experience of an empire's people. If art history privileges only the ability of wealth and power to produce artworks and architecture, then the history that it will always tell will be one of oppression, brutality, and violence masquerading under the subterfuge of artistry.

Thus, rather than praising the rule of Justinian for his patronage of buildings and art from Ravenna to Constantinople, we must be more eager to marginalize and dismiss the products of his rule for his brutal imperial politics and the massive social unrest that it engendered.

The Nika Riot was by no means an isolated incident but fit into a broader pattern of civil unrest during the late antique period, both in Constantinople and across the provinces.<sup>7</sup> In fact, as Geoffrey Greatrex has argued, many of the events that unfolded in the course of the riot followed similar patterns as evidenced in other uprisings across the region during the period.<sup>8</sup> These patterns and the context of Justinian's rule, therefore, become important for assessing the depth of this event on a broader social scale in the period and to better understand the conditions under which Hagia Sophia was built.

The two factions often blamed for these events, the Blues and the Greens, are often reduced to having a sort of sports-rivalry type conflict, but in reality this animosity was motivated by political interests and complicities. In the context of the Nika Riot, while there was a tension that precipitated the initial violence, the capital was torn asunder when several people from both parties were taken to be executed for murder. When the lives of two—one from each side—were spared due to damaged gallows, the two survivors were taken into custody and tensions rose as the populace demanded their release. Thus, the civil unrest that ensued emerged from a tension between the populace and the imperial authorities, who were seen as having unduly executed innocent people and were now refusing to release the two remaining detainees.

Schematically, then, we can observe a poignant parallel to modern uprisings—highlighting a similar format of tension between state policing, detention of a significant figure, and the demands of a populace for their release and/or justice. I by no means wish to draw a one-to-one parallel between the realities of systemic racism and police brutality in modern America with the events of 532, but it is important to see the structural rhetoric of imperial violence at work across time—a violence that takes aim at its own citizens, purporting to protect them, but in actuality aimed at asserting the hegemony of the state over its people.

While these parallels are superficial, what is striking about the Nika Riot is how often it has been reduced in history books to a modern sports brawl. Instead, the Nika Riot shares a lot more in common with the Black Lives Matter uprisings across the world after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 or of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2020. The scale of destruction is reminiscent of the similar events that occurred

<sup>7</sup> See Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Greatrex, "The Nika Riot," esp. 67–80.

174 in Los Angeles during the Watts Rebellion in 1965 or during the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising, synonymous with the arrest and beating of Rodney King. In these cases, the uprisings are motivated by the ongoing brutality of the state against its own people.

Like many of these events, which were referred to as “riots” in the popular press but are better referred to as “uprisings” or “rebellions,” the events of January 532 have been referred to by modern scholars as the “Nika Riot.” This is despite the fact that contemporaneous authors, including Prokopios, repeatedly refer to it as a rebellion, uprising, or insurrection (στάσις).<sup>9</sup> In light of the many so-called “riots” of the Civil Rights Movement across America during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the protests against anti-Black police brutality from the 1990s to the present, it is crucial to acknowledge how the categorization of the Nika Uprising as a “riot” would have similarly downplayed these events for modern readers.

Historiographically, it becomes important to ask how modern racism has worked to dismiss the importance of the Nika Uprising, seeing it as a premodern antecedent to the events of the late twentieth-century. While such late antique uprisings presented interesting parallels to mid-century Marxist historians, representing the rise of popular sovereignty,<sup>10</sup> the “riot” label has also allowed the events of 532 to be dismissed as an apolitical, capricious event marked by unwitting arson and looting.

Therefore, we should seriously consider how late-twentieth century anti-Black responses to uprisings against systemic racism could also lead to dismissive narratives about the “Nika Riot” and the construction of Hagia Sophia. Seeing the Nika Uprising as a product of sports-rivalry-driven “hooliganism,” rather than a rebellion against abusive imperial practices, reflects the ways in which this type of social unrest was being discussed colloquially in the postwar period. Thus, staging the destruction of the old Hagia Sophia as a casual byproduct of senseless violence, rather than a politically motivated act that targeted the major monuments of the city as its populace cried out against abuse.

In the years leading up to the Nika Uprising, Justinian had undertaken a series of brutal policies against his own people. In the *Secret History*, Prokopios presents the aftermath of the Nika revolt as a shameless power-grab by the emperor. In previous years, Justinian had been confiscating the wealthy’s properties piecemeal, but the uprising gave him a pretense to seize all property of Senate members who had sided against him.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the years, Justinian is said to have haphazardly meddled with public offices and roles, sowing confusion, and viciously persecuted those accused of heresies and those practicing paganism, among other accusations.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly before addressing the Nika Revolt, for example, Prokopios also recounts how Justinian passed legislation prohibiting same-gender sexual acts. While Prokopios is hardly a proponent of same-gender relations, he takes issue with the fact that Justinian prosecuted those who had been caught or even accused by hearsay of having same-gender relations before the law had even been passed.<sup>13</sup> Prokopios’s objection speaks clearly to Justinian’s perceived misuse of power and leads to the suggestion that many sought foreign refuge to evade Justinian’s capricious policies during this period.

Reading through the events leading up to the uprising, we begin to see a systemic account of how Justinian’s actions led to mounting civil unrest that ultimately culminated in the events of January 532. While the *Secret History* purports to give a more candid look at Justinian’s rule, its hyperbolic depiction of Justinian and his circle has long encouraged historians to consider the veracity of its statements and judgements with added caution. Therefore,

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9 See, for example, Prokopios, *Wars*, 218–219.

10 See Cameron, *Circus Factions*, 3.

11 Prokopios, *The Anecdota or Secret History* (2.12), ed. and trans. H.B. Dewing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 146–147. For an alternative translation and useful contextual materials, see Anthony Kaldellis, ed. and trans., *The Secret History with Related Texts* by Prokopios (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010).

12 *Ibid.*, 138–139.

13 *Ibid.*, 140–141.



while we might put into question the granularity of Prokopios's assessments, we can see the overarching sketch of Justinian's rampant brutality and sadistic fickleness that undermined public trust and safety.

Interestingly, Prokopios recounts how Justinian and Theodora even encouraged the rivalry between the Blues and Greens for their own political gain. He recounts early on how Justinian and Theodora would each support opposing causes held by the two factions to play them off one another, including the widespread antagonism between Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians that marked the major theological controversy of the era.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it seems that the Nika Revolt—whether seen as an “inside job” by Justinian or a casualty of Justinian's policy—was far more of a congruent social phenomenon of escalating civil unrest than the drunken mob-mentality of a sports crowd gone wild as our Byzantine art history surveys often depict it.

Where then does this leave Hagia Sophia? How do we tell its story without abetting the brutality of Justinian's reign and erasing the conditions of its construction?

After all, Hagia Sophia is hardly an innocent participant in the vicissitudes of empire. Throughout its life, it has served as the site of imperial coronations and been an active participant in the ceremonies of empire, both across the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires.<sup>15</sup> After Iconoclasm, when large-scale figural images were first added to the church in the ninth century, a monumental inscription added to the apse stated, “The images which the impostors had cast down here, pious emperors have again set up.”<sup>16</sup> However, this was a lie, a forgery of history to retroactively validate and assert the centrality of the icon as an inalienable part of Christian worship and the righteousness of the ruling imperial powers.

In the twentieth century, Hagia Sophia's formulation as a secular, modern monument cannot be removed from the international aspirations of the state in the early days of the Turkish Republic.<sup>17</sup> Even before this, the British in the 1920s had campaigned to convert Hagia Sophia to a Christian church, just a decade before Mustafa Kemal Atatürk transformed it into a modern museum.<sup>18</sup> Today, after the conversion of Hagia Sophia back into a mosque in 2020, its role in our global history is just as political as it has been its entire life.

While defenses of monuments often ask that we not politicize the past, it is undeniable that Hagia Sophia—like many of our monuments—has always been political. Lest we fear decentralizing Hagia Sophia for the conditions under which it was built, we must recognize that its complicity with the brutalities and caprices of empire have defined its history all along. Hagia Sophia was not merely as a stage or backdrop for ritual, but an actor in the articulations of religious and political dominance, often at the expense of its own people.

Writing from the vantage point of 2021, we are particularly well trained to recognize how our monuments can be mobilized politically and how to call out the problematic conditions of their creation. We are also attuned to understanding how our historiographies have inclined us to dismiss certain social movements and instances of civil unrest due to methodologies that perpetrate widespread anti-Blackness and viewpoints that disregarded these uprisings as mere “riots” in the late-twentieth century, particularly regarding how they are taught in the classroom and in introductory surveys to the material. In the wake of the Black Lives

14 Ibid., 126–127.

15 For a brief survey of Hagia Sophia in the Ottoman world, see Gülru Necipoğlu, “The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium,” in *Hagia Sophia: From the Age of Justinian to the Present*, eds. Robert Mark and Ahmet Çakmak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.), 195–225. See also Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, *Constantinople/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

16 Cyril Mango and Ernest J.W. Hawkins, “The Apse Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul: Report on Work Carried Out in 1964,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19 (1965): 115–151, at 125.

17 Robert S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950: Holy Wisdom, Modern Monument* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

18 Erik Goldstein, “Holy Wisdom and British Foreign Policy, 1918–1922: The Saint Sophia Redemption Agitation,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 15 (1991): 36–64.

176 Matter protests of 2020, it is impossible to look back at a moment in history like January 532 and trivialize the uprising of a populace against its oppressive imperial authorities as casual or inconsequential. Today, we are in a critical position to rethink how we approach monuments like Hagia Sophia and how we teach and narrate the historical moment in which they emerged.

In writing an ethical history of Byzantine art, as I proposed earlier, Hagia Sophia would be but a minor player—an exemplar of the abuses of power and excess, rather than a harbinger of any semblance of a Golden Age. Instead, much like many documents of barbarity that litter our historical record, this monument would be an example of the fraught undertakings of despotic rulers who put patronage over the good of their people or as a distraction from their crimes. But, again, this is not a proposition to artificially cancel out Hagia Sophia from the record, but rather to reprioritize how we write our historical narratives so that they value the accomplishments of social good over material conquests. A history that privileges the thriving and well-being of society would not need Hagia Sophia to attest to the richness and complexity of a period's achievements. Here, I wish to dare scholars of Byzantine studies to write a new history of Byzantium that does not need Hagia Sophia, a new history that looks obliquely at our artworks, buildings, and archives to find other monuments that can serve as the apexes of social well-being, capturing the incredible variety and diversity that the long history of Byzantium has to offer us today.