

Letter of Protest against the conversion of Byzantine churches into mosques

from the Department of History and Archaeology

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

The Department of History and Archaeology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens wishes to express its concern at the ongoing conversion of important Byzantine churches in Asia Minor and Istanbul into mosques.

This process began with the dilapidated church of Agia Sophia in Iznik (Byzantine Nikaia). It was restored with an inappropriate roof and began to function as a mosque in July 2012. The church of Agia Sophia in Trabzon (Byzantine Trapezous), the most significant Byzantine monument of the Pontic region and the only Byzantine museum in this historic area, was the next to be converted into a mosque. The fabric of the church and its wall-paintings were hidden behind temporary structures. It was recently announced that the ruined "katholikon" of the Studium Monastery in Istanbul, only surviving basilica in the city and a major copyists' center for the production of manuscripts during the heyday of the Byzantine Empire, is going to be restored in order to serve as a mosque, despite its extremely delicate state of preservation. There is also ongoing discussion on the possibility of converting the Great Church of Agia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque.

The Department of History and Archaeology protests against this process. Conversion causes serious damage to monuments which are already frail, limits free access and hinders conservation and study. We call on all international organisations to take action in order to prevent further damage to these monuments of world heritage and guarantee accessibility to the public and the scholarly world with due respect to international treaties and agreements on the restoration and preservation of historic buildings.