

# Public perceptions of Byzantine heritage in Türkiye

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**M**y project at the BIAA focuses on the relationships between local people and Byzantine heritage assets in Türkiye. In an extension of my PhD research at the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, I am implementing new methodologies to supplement the data I collected and deepen my analysis of the subject.

The relationship between cultural heritage and identity has long been recognised. Especially with the establishment of modern nation-states from the late 18th century onwards, the past and heritage have been used to justify a nation-state's existence and prove its distinctiveness. A glorious past would be chosen (sometimes even 'invented') from a nation's history and heritage appropriated to fit the national narrative. The selection of a certain past and heritage as 'national heritage' undoubtedly resulted in the destruction, deliberate or not, of the material traces of the pasts that were 'dissonant'.

Greece and Türkiye both underwent processes of this kind. Greece established its identity along two core axes: Classical Antiquity and Byzantium/Orthodox Christianity, disregarding its Ottoman past and uniting the modern Greek people and the state with Ancient Greek civilization. On the other hand, the modern Turkish state employed the Turkish War of Independence and the legacy of the historic Turkic tribes with roots in Central Asia. An intensive programme of 'shaping history' was undertaken to make the argument that Anatolia was always the homeland of the Turkic people. The selective creation of national narratives and 'national heritage' eventually resulted in the denial, neglect and to some extent, demolition of the heritage of the 'Other' in both countries.

Focusing on perceptions of two specific 'dissonant' heritages – Ottoman heritage in Greece and Byzantine heritage in Türkiye – I have investigated how national identities were constructed during the early years of these two independent nation-states. I have also looked at how national heritage discourses were subsequently created by excluding those cultural heritages deemed to belong to the 'Other' and by choosing material and immaterial cultural heritage appropriate to the national historiography as the 'national heritage'. I have then investigated the effects of these narratives on the material wellbeing of those dissonant heritage assets.

In addition, I have explored people's perceptions of the heritage of the 'Other' through public opinion surveys (443 in all) with the inhabitants of two towns in Greece (Trikala and Serres) and two in Türkiye (Trabzon and İznik). The questionnaires had three main parts: demographics; public interest and attitude towards cultural heritage in general; and public interest and attitude towards heritage of the 'Other'. The results in İznik and Trabzon, which underlie my BIAA project, provide meaningful insights into how locals feel about cultural



Hagia Sophia in Trabzon.

heritage in general and about the Byzantine cultural heritage in their cities. Interactions between individuals and Byzantine monuments appear to take place and increase when these monuments continue in use; for example, as city walls and gates, bridges or aqueducts, or when they are utilised for new functions; that is, as museums and cultural centres, but also as mosques, like the Hagia Sophia churches in İznik and Trabzon. These monuments are integrated into the daily lives of inhabitants, which helps to maintain their physical integrity and contributes to public acceptance. Most survey participants considered Byzantine heritage part of their town's history and culture, but fewer people considered it part of their personal histories and identities. Personal identifications with Byzantine monuments mostly occurred when participants had memories of them from their childhood or youth, or if their contemporary lives were somehow related to these monuments.

Türkiye's tourism-focused perception of its cultural heritage has also been influential. Like the heritage of other civilizations, Byzantine heritage in Türkiye is evaluated by the public for its tourist appeal and economic potential; but its 'otherness' is still reflected in Turkish people's opinions. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of Byzantine monuments in Türkiye make them 'worthy of protecting' for the people. On the other hand, since the 1950s, nationalisms in Türkiye have continuously expressed themselves through cultural heritage and, more specifically, by targeting Byzantine heritage. Gaining strength within the last two decades, this discourse has led to tangible outcomes which negatively affect the preservation of Byzantine monuments in Türkiye.

I will now use qualitative research to better understand the relationships between local people and Byzantine heritage assets, and the factors that affect that relationship. To this end, I will be conducting face-to-face, open-ended interviews with target groups living in İznik and Trabzon.