

# Skript

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Column: Visions of Istanbul from the sea, past and present

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# VISIONS OF ISTANBUL FROM THE SEA, PAST AND PRESENT

*Ewan Short*

Modern day Istanbul is a city surrounded and intersected by the sea. The rhythms of life in the city are orientated around the Bosphorus straits, the inlet of water called the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmara to the south of the Bosphorus. For many of the seventeen million residents of the city, their journey to work is defined by the crossing of the vast Bosphorus straits, by car or by boat. Leisure activities are also orientated around the city's coastlines and small public transport buses (*dolmuşen*) regularly carry residents down to the coastline from the steep hills which rise above. As a visitor to the city during my PhD research, I was impressed by the sudden sensory change when leaving the enclosed streets on the city's hills and arriving at the shores of the vast Bosphorus straits.

The spectacle of the modern city is also often presented in media from the perspective of a viewer who is on or near the sea. This is encapsulated by many scenes in the popular Turkish drama *Yasak Elma (Forbidden Fruit)*. Another example is the recent 'Istanbul is the New Cool' advertisement campaign to promote tourism in the city, which begins with a panorama of the Hagia Sophia above the Bosphorus and an image of the medieval cityscape from across the sea, with the Maiden's Tower (Turkish: Kız Kulesi) in the foreground. Thus, for both residents and visitors to Istanbul, the image of the cityscape from a viewer on the sea, or on the coast, is a significant way of experiencing and imagining the modern city.

It is evident that the sea was also at the centre of the sensory experiences of historical residents of Istanbul (called Constantinople until 1930). The historic centre of the city, consisting of Byzantine and Ottoman era buildings, is built upon a peninsula which juts out into the Bosphorus, with the Golden Horn to the north and the Sea of Marmara to the south. The coastline of this area of the city is lined by monumental buildings, mostly Ottoman era mosques, but also some Byzantine churches. The most famous Byzantine monument, and arguably the most well-known historical building in Istanbul is the Hagia Sophia, built by the emperor Justinian between 532-537 AD. The domes of this building tower above the eastern shoreline of the city centre, with the only comparable building being the adjacent Ottoman Blue Mosque, or Sultan Ahmet Mosque, built between 1609-1617 by the Ottoman Sultan Ahmet I.

Throughout Istanbul's history, political leaders have been well aware of the potential of the city's coastline for projecting images of power. Recently in 2019, the monumental Çamlıca Mosque was inaugurated by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the Üsküdar district of Istanbul, on the Asian bank of the Bosphorus. This grand building captures the eye of the viewer looking towards the Asian side of Istanbul from the Bosphorus straits or from the European side of the city. It has six minarets, which is unusual for a Turkish mosque and makes it comparable to

the Ottoman Blue Mosque. The appearance of the building is widely interpreted as an image which presents Erdoğan as comparable to the historic Ottoman rulers of Turkey.

The Blue Mosque itself was deliberately built opposite the Hagia Sophia by Ahmet I. The appearance of the monumental mosque, directly opposite the Hagia Sophia on the city's eastern peninsula, was certainly designed to impress upon visitors to the city's eastern peninsula that the Sultan surpassed the Byzantine emperors of old. However, this message was also communicated to people sailing around the city or arriving in the city by boat. From the perspective of a viewer from the Bosphorus straits, the domed roof of the Blue Mosque appears in alignment with that of the Hagia Sophia. From the sea the viewer can see clearly that the domes of the Blue Mosque are comparatively more elaborate than those of Hagia Sophia. This spectacle would have demonstrated unambiguously to seventeenth-century audiences that Ahmet had outdone the Byzantine emperor Justinian.

Justinian himself, the founder of Hagia Sophia, also seems to have been well aware of the potential of the city's coastline as a stage for projecting power. The Hagia Sophia was built in the aftermath of the Nika Riots in 532, when Justinian had almost lost his throne. It was not the only church which Justinian commissioned. After 532 he also rebuilt Hagia Eirene, to the north of Hagia Sophia and now on the grounds of the Ottoman Topkapi palace, and built St Sergius and Bacchus on the coastline further to the south. When looking at the city of Constantinople from the sea these domes align to project a convincing image of Justinian's domination of the Byzantine cityscape. Through these buildings, Justinian showed that he was in control. Thus, although separated in time by some fifteen centuries, a Byzantine emperor, Ottoman sultan and Turkish president were all involved in building projects designed to maximise the potential for the projection of power provided by visions of the city from the sea. This suggests that powerful people in the city have consistently been well aware of the significance of the coastal topography of the city for the sensory experience of residents and visitors, and as a stage to shape their own public images through architecture.

**Ewan Short** studeerde Geschiedenis aan de Universiteit van Oxford en Laatantieken en Byzantijnse studies in Cardiff, waar hij promoveerde. Hij is geïnteresseerd in de geschiedenis van vrouwen binnen de Byzantijnse en Sassanidisch-Perzische studies en de geschiedenis van de stedelijke omgeving in Istanbul. Momenteel werkt hij aan een monografie over Aikaterine.