

Andrew O'Brien (History) – Istanbul, September 2010

I planned this trip to Istanbul as a apt epilogue to my studies regarding the Ottoman empire during my History Part I degree, as well as because I wanted to visit the traditional 'meeting point' of Europe and Asia. Coincidentally after I had booked the flights, I decided to take a paper about the Byzantine Empire and the rise of Islam for my Part II, which also fitted into the itinerary of the trip as well and doubled its significance.

During this trip I visited the key monuments of the Ottoman Empire within their former capital city as well as those which remained from the Byzantine period, which preceded that of the great Islamic empire. Firstly were the two great architectural masterpieces of the Aya Sofia and the Blue Mosque, constructed in the 6th and the 16th centuries respectively. It is not only incredible that the former building still stands today, but that it inspired the architect of the latter to build a series of great mosques across Istanbul and the Ottoman empire in an attempt to emulate the magnificence of the Byzantines' great church. Whilst the interior of the Aya Sofia has suffered with age, and the Muslim conquest of the city in 1453, some of the original gold mosaics remain as shining examples of the sophistication of Byzantine art and the wealth of the empire under Justinian I during the mid-6th century. I was more impressed by the interior of the Blue Mosque, as the central dome appears to effortlessly float above the floor below, and was keenly interested in the different features of Islamic religious buildings when compared to those of Christians. The impressive tile work inside the mosque echoed the Ottoman past of the building, which is much lighter inside than a Christian Cathedral as the result of lighter colours used on the tiles and the greater number of windows built into the Mosque.

After these two impressive buildings, I visited the Topkapi Palace, the home of the Ottoman sultans for almost four hundred years after their conquest of Istanbul. The palace also displayed the classic designs of Ottoman tile work and felt very spacious inside, although felt very different to a more European-style palace built at the same period of history. Much of the Sultan's role was carefully guarded by the eunuchs and harem of the palace, and despite the grand audience chamber he often remained by a gold, screen cage during meetings of the great council. The views from the palace gardens were impressive and showed the sheer size of the city and the scale of the urban sprawl which Istanbul now suffers from.

The interconnected nature of the two great empires was perfectly demonstrated by my visit to the fortress at Yedikule, on the coast of the Sea of Marmara, at the base of the famous land walls of Constantinople. These walls were built by the Byzantines between the 4th and the 5th centuries to protect the land approach to the city, and remain an impressive series of fortifications to this day. Comprised of three separate walls at different heights, including a ditch, they remained unbroken until the successful Ottoman siege of 1453. Interestingly the Sultans' utilised these walls and rebuilt them to defend the newly rechristened Istanbul from land attack, constructing an imposing star fort at the south end of the walls at Yedikule. The remains of two civilisations in the same city made Istanbul an incredibly interesting and rich destination to visit, and I have returned bolstered with knowledge about the Byzantines and impressed by the sophistication of both the Greek and Ottoman empires which helped to make the city what it is today.