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Diving into the Secrets of Hagia Sophia

A new documentary on the underground tunnels and reservoirs that permeate the earth around Hagia Sophia, *Ayasofya'nın Derinliklerinde* (In the Depths of Hagia Sophia), is being recorded by filmmaker Göksel Gülensoy, who states, "I believe what is beneath Hagia Sophia is much more exciting than what is above the surface." On the floor of the main hall under the gigantic dome, the reservoir door close to the entrance was opened first for the first time in 64 years, and for the first time in history, a diver was going underneath Hagia Sophia. The reservoir under the first door was 12 meters deep. Near the bottom, the diver saw two thick pieces of wood, resembling shovel handles and a bucket, but they turned into dust when he touched them. The second shutter, closer to the center of the dome revealed two passages extending to the center of the building and to the exit door – passages that might extend the famous Byzantine building to Topkapı Palace and the Yerebatan Cisterns. The hall into which they first stepped was long, like a corridor, and strengthened with pillars. There they found glass from the giant chandeliers that used to light up Hagia Sophia as well as what looked like pieces of stained glass in seven colors.



The spelunkers also tried to find the secret passages said to extend from Tekfur Palace, next to the old city walls, to the islands of the Marmara Sea. Two stone tunnels of approximately 70 centimeters in height extended in the direction of Sultanahmet Square and Topkapı Palace – presumably the tunnels that the mighty 5th-century Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II had used to go to Tekfur Palace and to the hippodrome without being seen by the public. The divers entered the tunnels in opposite directions. Each of these tunnels was strengthened with brick arches and split into two after 50 meters. One branch of each tunnel led to a spot under the dome, but those passages were closed. Another branch led to the palace yard. This locale, it seemed, likely included the gravesites of St. Antinegos, the first person to be buried in Hagia Sophia, in the 13th century, and of Patriarch Athanasius, who was interred 200 years later. Permission for

exploration had been granted on the condition that everything found was to be left in its original place and that no changes to the structure of the building were to be made. That is why the sealed passages were left untouched.

Re-written from <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=diving-into-the-secrets-of-hagia-sophia-2009-08-04>

By Serhan Yedig