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St. Irene during Ottoman Times

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One of the most prominent churches of Istanbul's Byzantine history, St. Irene was repurposed and continued to be in use during the Ottoman times. Research and publications on the subject have usually treated this structure as a Byzantine church, overlooking the quite colorful place it held in the Ottoman period and the many important events it witnessed in terms of military history and museum studies. Dr. Bilge Ar, research assistant at ITU's Department of Architecture, will discuss the transformations of the structure throughout the Ottoman period.

Immediately after the conquest of Istanbul, the spoils from the Byzantine army were placed at St. Irene, and the church began to serve as a warehouse. After the construction of the New Palace (Topkapı Palace), the church came to be located inside Palace limits to be used as an armory, and was called the "*enderun cebehanesi*" or "*iç cebehane*" since it was located on palace grounds. Besides Byzantine spoils, the original Christian relics were allowed to remain here, with the addition of certain holy relics of the Muslim faith brought in after the conquest of Egypt. As a military building and in effect a safe box for valuable items, St. Irene was very well-protected.

At the turn of the 18th century, as a result of the newly established ties with the West, a series of changes occurred in Ottoman mentality, leading to the opening of an exhibition entitled "Dar-ül Esliha" (House of Weapons) at St. Irene as ordered by Ahmed III, showcasing war spoils from conquests and the weapons mentioned above. The building, still used as an armory, thus also became an official venue for exhibitions.

As a military building, St. Irene was directly affected by military events, wars, and reforms. Incidents such as the Patrona Halil Uprising, the military reforms undertaken with the help of Humbaracı Ahmed Paşa, janissary uprisings, the Vaka-i Hayriye incident in 1826, and the abolishment of the janissary guild took their toll on the collection of military equipment, ancient weapons, and ammunition kept at St. Irene, causing the exhibition to lose some of its attraction.

The fate of the St. Irene exhibitions changed when Fethi Ahmed Paşa, the son-in-law of Sultan Abdülmecid, was appointed Director of the Imperial Armory in 1845. The Paşa had

been to important European centers such as Moscow, Vienna, Paris, and London as required by his missions, followed the latest developments, noted the importance attributed to ancient works in Europe, as well as the care with which these were collected and exhibited. Upon his return, Fethi Ahmed Paşa added certain ancient works to the military collection already at St. Irene, and opened two adjacent collection exhibitions at the atrium in 1846. One of these was the “Mecmua-i Asar-i Atika” (Ancient Works Collection) and “Mecmua-i Ešliha-i Atika” (Ancient Weapons Collection). Initiated by Fethi Ahmed Paşa, these collections constitute the first Ottoman museums.

In the period that followed, the building’s function as an exhibition venue diminished due to wars, but in 1869, two years after Sultan Abdülaziz’s visit to European capitals in 1867, St. Irene was opened as the first official museum of the Ottoman Empire, called “Müze-i Hümayun” (Imperial Museum). During the war-ridden period following the transfer of the archaeological collection to the new museum at Çinili Köşk in 1875, the ancient weapons collection left at St. Irene remained inactive, but before World War I these weapons were rearranged and the first Military Museum was opened at St. Irene, remaining active during the early years of the Republic.