

CHAPTER

11

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *The Hagia Sophia*
by Procopius

The Byzantine emperor Justinian ordered his official court historian, Procopius, to document his ambitious public building program. Procopius wrote On Justinian's Buildings in 555 in which he described Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom, in Constantinople. Completed in about 537, this magnificent church was considered the largest Christian building in the world. How would you describe this church in your own words?

It is, indeed, a proof of the esteem with which God regarded the Emperor, that He furnished him with men who would be so useful in effecting his designs, and we are compelled to admire the intelligence of the Emperor, in being able to choose the most suitable of mankind to carry out the noblest of his works.

The church consequently presented a most glorious spectacle, extraordinary to those who beheld it, and altogether incredible to those who are told of it. In height it rises to the very heavens, and overtops the neighbouring buildings like a ship anchored among them: it rises above the rest of the city, which it adorns, while it forms a part of it. . . . It is singularly full of light and sunshine; you would declare that the place is not lighted by the sun from without, but that the rays are produced within itself, such an abundance of light is poured into this church . . . Thus far I imagine the building is not incapable of being described, even by a weak and feeble tongue. As the arches are arranged in a quadrangular figure, the stonework between them takes the shape of a triangle. . . . A spherical-shaped dome . . . makes it exceedingly beautiful; from the lightness of the building it does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from heaven by the fabled golden chain. . . . The sight causes men to constantly change their point of view, and the spectator can nowhere point to any part which he admires more than the rest, but having viewed the art which appears everywhere, men contract their eyebrows as they look at each point, and are unable to comprehend such workmanship, but always depart thence stupified through their incapacity to comprehend it.

The entire ceiling is covered with pure gold, which adds glory to its beauty, though the rays of light reflected upon the gold from the marble surpass it in beauty; there are two porticos on each

side, which do not in any way dwarf the size of the church, but add to its width. . . . Of these two porticos, the one is set apart for male, and the other for female worshippers; there is no variety in them, nor do they differ in any respect from one another, but their very equality and similarity add to the beauty of the church. . . . Whoever enters there to worship perceives at once that it is not by any human strength or skill, but by the favour of God that this work has been perfected; his mind rises sublime to commune with God, feeling that He cannot be far off, but must especially love to dwell in the place which He has chosen. . . . [M]oreover, it is impossible accurately to describe the treasure of gold and silver plate and gems, which the Emperor Justinian has presented to it; but by the description of one of them, I leave the rest to be inferred. That part of the church which is especially sacred, and where the priests alone are allowed to enter, which is called the Sanctuary, contains forty thousand pounds' weight of silver.

from Procopius, Of the Buildings of Justinian, translated by Aubrey Stewart (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1888), 2–5, 9–11. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., Documents in World History, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 156–158.

Research Options

1. **Analyzing Issues** Find photographs of the Hagia Sophia. Then discuss with classmates whether or not Procopius accurately depicts this church in his account.
2. **Using Research in Writing** Find out more about the Hagia Sophia. Who designed it? How long did it take to build? What are its dimensions? How much did it cost to build? What construction materials were used? Then draw a sketch of the church or create a scale model, adding captions to report your findings.