



Summary :

Byzantine Amisos was a coastal city of the Helenopontos province, between Trebizond and Sinope. It was an episcopal see, an important harbour and market, a fortress and the seat of military and administrative officials of the theme of Armeniakon. It was sacked by the Arabs in the 9th century. It was taken over by the Seljuk Turks (1194-1204), successively by the Grand Komneni (1204-1214), the Seljuk Turks again, the Mongols and the Turkmen. The Genovese settled there in 1285. It was under Ottomans rule after 1419.

Other Names

Misso, Aminosos, Simisso, Samsun

Geographical Location

Northeast Asia Minor, modern north-central Turkey

Historical Region

Pontus

Administrative Dependence

Province of Helenopontos, theme of Armeniakon

1. Topography

In the *Synecdemus* of Hierocles (official list of the Byzantine cities of the first half of the 6th century AD) the coastal city of Amisos is registered¹ among the seven cities of the [province of Helenopontos](#) in the [diocese of Pontica](#). Amisos was situated to the east of [Sinope](#), which secured the communication between north-east Asia Minor and [Crimea](#), as well as the communication between the ports of the [Pontos Polemoniakos](#) and the Helenopontos; and to the west of [Trebizond](#), the gateway into Persia. The city was known in Antiquity as Amisos and from the Roman period onwards as Missos. By the 10th century it is usually mentioned in the sources as Aminosos. During the Middle Byzantine period Amisos formed the northern border between the [theme of Paphlagonia](#) and the [theme of Armeniakon](#). The fertile hinterland yielded abundant harvests of olives (the plains of Phazemonitis and Chiliokomon and the valley of the river Lycus), providing ample supplies to Amisos, and rendered it an 'intermediate harbour' towards [Constantinople](#) and Crimea. The outskirts of the city were cultivated, as mentioned in the sources and confirmed by modern surveys. Furthermore, Amisos controlled the routes of the caravans to and from [Sebasteia](#) (mod. Sivas),² Aleppo and Baghdad. These cities played a key economic role during the Middle Ages, irrespective of their political masters or the particularities of the historical conditions.

2. Military and political history

During the reign of [Diocletian](#) (284-305), the city of Amisos belonged to the province of Diospontos, which was renamed Helenopontos by [Constantine I](#) (324-337). In around 860 it was a [tourma](#) in the [theme](#) of Armeniakon. In 863 the Arab [emir](#) of [Melitene](#) Omar (Amr) ibn Abdallah ibn Marwan al-Aqta' [invaded Amisos](#), sacked it and caused great devastation.³ The city, however, managed to recover. In the 10th and towards the 11th century it was the seat of a [tourma](#) as indicated by the seal of Christophoros, [tourmarch](#) and [paraphylax](#) of Amisos.⁴ Presumably in the mid-1070s, [Armenians](#) originating from [Amaseia](#) (mod. Amasya) settled in the city.⁵ Between 1194 and 1204 the city came under the rule of the future Seljuk sultan Rukn al Din (1197-1204), a friend and ally of Alexios Angelos, the future [Alexios III](#) (1195-1203), probably without a fight.⁶ But the settlements of the Turkmen in the lower city are dated a few decades before 1194. In 1204 [Alexios I Grand Komnenos](#) (1204-1222) recaptured the city. Amisos was probably definitively captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1214.⁷ [Genovese](#) traders active in the Black Sea had settled in the city before 1285. [George Scholares](#), the former [megas doux](#) of the [Empire of Trebizond](#), sought refuge among the city's Genoese in 1363; in 1354 he had initiated an unsuccessful rebellion against [Alexios III Grand Komnenos](#) (1349-1390). In 1419 Amisos was annexed by the Muslim [principality of Castamone](#) and subsequently the city became a possession of the Ottoman Turks.



3. Amisos' importance

3.1. Early- and Middle Byzantine periods

During the Late Antiquity and throughout the Byzantine era, Amisos was a significant city. By the Middle Byzantine period the settlement on the city's citadel had been abandoned. Contrary to the norm for this period, when the unfortified cities and markets fall into decline and new settlements on citadels or castles are created instead, the city of Amisos was transferred from the naturally fortified citadel towards the coast, where it developed inside a castle. Amisos played a key role in Byzantine economy, closely related to the state's external policy. [Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos](#) (913-959) argues that, if the agricultural production is not transported via the port of 'Amisos' and (the themes) of Paphlagonia, [Boukellarion](#) and the (borderline areas) of the theme of Armeniakon, the inhabitants of the (Crimean city of) [Cherson](#) will not be able to survive.⁸ The provisioning of the Greek city in Crimea depended on the security of the [trading activities](#) in the Pontus and on the agriculture of north-central Asia Minor. Amisos had been long established as the principal harbour of this region. It also functioned as a centre for imported goods from Lazica, Bosphorus and Cherson.⁹ Amisos was a *kommerkion* in the theme of Armeniakon, as attested by the seal of the *kommerkiarios* Kyrillos¹⁰ and it was the fifth official city of the theme. In the second half of the 9th and throughout the 10th century it was a *kommerkion* and an export centre for cereals, as attested by the lead seals of Moschos, the *horrearius* of Amisos in the 9th century, and Paul, the *chartouliarios* and *horrearius* of Amisos in the 10th-11th century, as well as the seat of *abydikos*.¹¹ During this period fiscal officials were stationed in the city. The seals of the *dioiketes* John (8th-9th century) and the *dioiketes* Alexander (9th-10th century) are preserved.¹²

3.2. Late Byzantine Period

In 1200 the Seljuk governor of Amisos Rukn al Din took measures that undermined the interests of the [Turkmen](#) merchants of the city, in an obvious attempt to promote the interests of merchants in the rival city of Sebasteia. Later, in the early 13th century, Amisos was a *kommerkion* in the Empire of Trebizond. During this period, Sebasteia, the commercial centre of the [Sultanate of Rum](#), was greatly affected; actually the Seljuk Turks are considered to have altogether been excluded from commercial activities in the Black Sea.¹³ Subsequently, since Amisos came again under the control of the Seljuk Turks, the community of the Turkmen in the city, as well as that of the Genovese, developed after 1214 and after 1285 respectively. In the 14th century Amisos, cut off from the inland, was the most important import centre for Crimean cereal. The commerce conducted through the port of Amisos depended on products destined for Constantinople originating from the Pontus, as well as from the [Middle and Far East](#) via Trebizond. The city was also connected to the commerce destined for the Crimean market which involved Byzantine products, and to the transactions of the Eastern merchants maintained in the currency of the Byzantine Empire in general.¹⁴ The harbour and the *kommerkion* of Amisos, located between Sinope and Trebizond, was the destination of all western and eastern roads, and for this reason it was an obvious *locus* of exchanges between the two worlds.

4. Monuments

The citadel of Amisos was constructed on a natural highland plateau¹⁵ to survey the sea. The site of Aghia Anna is very close to the coast, according to the Greek [portolans](#). It is unlikely that a pier ever existed there. The temple of St Peter on the south side of the citadel and the 'Manasteri' (probably the temple of St John the Baptist) on the west have been preserved;¹⁶ in the second one, some traces of the frescoes are still discernible. Two marble columns have been preserved in an Early Byzantine *cistern*. Other, less impressive, *cisterns* have been preserved as well, moreover a circular and a number of semi-circular towers, extremities of buildings, the ruins of the temple of St Theodore incorporated into a mosque, marble sculpture fragments and architectural members of an unidentified temple a.o. Before 1194 the settlement was relocated to the coast southeast, and a castle was constructed on the seashore. The older building phase of the city's wall dates to the Middle Byzantine period, *terminus ante quem* the year 1194, and the latest one to the Seljuk or Ottoman period, after 1214 or 1419; this work clearly strengthened the defensive capabilities of the fortifications. A possible Genovese restoration after 1285 is not easily attested in the masonry.¹⁷



In 1404, Ruy Gonzales Clavijo saw two castles.¹⁸ In fact Amisos developed into two independent settlements with separate defensive walls, one of the Genoese (Samsun) and the other, featuring a port, of the Seljuk Turks (Samsun). The settlements faced each other, being an arrow's flight away from each other (c. 300 m). Today one can no longer clearly discern which ruins belong to the castle of the Genoese and which to that of the Seljuk Turks. The modern city of Samsun spreads for 3 km along the shore, divided into four main building complexes. During the 19th century the two of them, the ones on the slopes of the hill south and east of the citadel, formed the Greek and the Armenian quarters respectively. The other two, those laying close to the sea, were the Ottoman quarters. The oldest quarter must correspond to Late Byzantine Amisos and early [Samsun](#). Here the old bazaar of the 13th century and the Mongolian Pazar CamiJ survive.

1. Honigmann, E., (ed.) *Le Synekdèmos d'Hiéroklys et l'opuscule géographique de Georges de Chypre*, (Bruxelles 1939) p. 37a, col. 702.
2. Sebasteia especially became a commercial centre of the Sultanate of Rum, while the other ports of the Pontus fell into decline, since the roads were no longer safe in the 11th century; the cities connected with Sebasteia however found themselves in an advantageous position, see Belke, K, Mersich, N., (eds) *Paphlagonien und Honorias*. *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* 9 (Wien 1996) s.v. 'Kromna' p. 241.
3. Omar (Amr) ibn Abdallah ibn Marwan al-Aqta' reached Amisos by crossing Cappadocia. The Byzantines, under the general Petronas, could not reach the city in time. See *Theophanis Continuatus*, ed. C. De Boor (Bonn 1838), pp. 179, 14-16. See also Βλυσίδου, Β. et al., *Η Μικρά Ασία των Θεμάτων: έρευνες πάνω στην γεωγραφική φυσιογνωμία και προσωπογραφία των βυζαντινών θεμάτων της Μικράς Ασίας (7ος - 11ος αι.)*, (ΙΒΕ/ΕΙΕ, Ερευνητική Βιβλιοθήκη 1, Αθήνα 1998) p. 151, it is most likely that it was Amisos and its outskirts that were sacked, not two homonym cities, one of which would be completely unknown.
4. Mc Geer, Er. – Nesbitt, J. – Oikonomidès, N. (+) (eds.) *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, τ. 4: the East*, (Washington D.C. 2001) p. 74.
5. The Armenians were driven out of their homeland Amaseia after 1070, when the city fell to the Seljuk Turks. The Armenians of Amisos spoke the dialect of Dokeia (mod. Tokat). It is possible that they settled in Amisos following the capture of Amaseia by the Seljuk Turks, or after the capture of Sebasteia by the Mongol khan Tamerlane, i.e. after 1400.
6. The circumstances remain uncertain. The available information on the policy of the Seljuks in Amisos forced scholars to suggest that the city was probably ceded, and not captured. It is also suggested that the two communities, Greek and Turkish, coexisted harmoniously.
7. During 1233-1248 a mint operated in the city of Amisos. In the late 13th century, the Seljuk sultan Kaikubad III (1284-1307), tributary vassal to the Mongols, entrusted the administration of Amisos and the income from the imposed taxes to his grandson Masud Beğ. In 1392 or 1394, the city was successfully claimed by the Ottoman sultan Bayezid I (1389-1402). The Mongols reacted effectively in favour of their tributaries. In 1404, Mir Suleyman Çelebi, great-grandson of the Seljuk sultan Kaikubad III, became the city's governor. After 1400, Armenians from Amaseia, which was captured by the Mongols, may have settled in Amisos.
8. In his "Πρὸς τὸν υἱὸν Ῥωμανὸν" («To his son Romanos»), see Moravcsik, G. – Jenkins, R.J.H.(ed.-transl) *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio*, (Washington, D.C. 1967) p. 286.
9. The testimony dates to the late 6th century; see Zepos, I., Zepos, P.(eds.), *Jus Graeco-Romanum I: Novellae et aerae Bullae post Iustinian* (Αθήνα 1931), pp. 18,19: the novella of Tiberius II Constantine no. 11, of the year 575, «περὶ κουφισμῶν δημοσίων».
10. Zacos, G. - Nesbitt, J. (eds.), *Byzantine Lead Seals II* (Bern 1984), no. 200: the seal of *kommerkiarios* Kyrillos, c.860.
11. Mc Geer, Er. – Nesbitt, J. – Oikonomidès, N. (+) (eds), *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art 4: the East* (DORLC, Washington D.C. 2001), p. 74. According to Laurent it was the seat of abydikos, Laurent, V., *Le Corpus des sceaux de l'Empire byzantin* (Paris 1965-1981) p. 284.compare Zacos, G. - Nesbitt, J. (eds), *Byzantine Lead Seals II* (Bern 1984), no. 200.
12. Mc Geer, Er. – Nesbitt, J. – Oikonomidès, N. (+) (eds.), *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art 4: the*



East (DORLC, Washington D.C. 2001), p. 74.

13. Cahen, C., *Pre-Ottoman Turkey. A General Survey of Material and Spiritual Culture and History c. 1071-1330*, (London 1968) pp. 119, 164.

14. See Hendy, M.F., *Studies in the Byzantium Monetary Economy c.300-1450* (Cambridge Mass. 1985), pp. 257ff., 276, 470, regarding the control over the gold coin's circulation within the empire.

15. The citadel, modern Kara or Eski Samsun, lays at a height of 159m, and covers an area of 2.7km by 1.5km with an N-S orientation. Amisos is generally considered to have been an easily defensible settlement.

16. See Cumont, Fr. – Cumont, Eu., *Voyage d' exploration archéologique dans le Pont et la Petite Arménie, Studia Pontica II* (Brussels 1906), pp. 111-117.

17. In the 19th century, when the castle was still visible, there was a light construction over the basic fortifications. Was this the Genovese addition or a third building phase? And was the Turkish phase constructed by the Seljuks?

18. Ruy Gonzales Clavijo was an ambassador of Henry III of Castile to the court of the Mongol khan Tamerlane in the early 15th century. He visited and described many sites of the Pontus in the context of his travel to the Ilkhanate. He did not go ashore in Amisos but preferred to remain onboard, because the port belonged to the Turkish city. The description of Amisos brings to mind Smyrna, where the two castles, the Genovese and the Turkish, faced each other.

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Glossary :

	abydikos Official of the kommerkion, equivalent to the kommerkiarios. The name of the office is linked with the function of the kommerkion in the city of Abydos, in the narrows of Helespontos, that served the purveyance of Constantinople. The abydikoi could be seated in the kommerkia of certain cities. They exercised their power along with the kommerkiarioi.
	chartoularios Byzantine officer (from the word charta meaning the official document) with various duties 1. In the Early Byzantine period the chartoularii served the officia of high rank, like the prefecturae, being in charge of the archives. In the Middle Byzantine period chartoularii served almost everywhere, being in charge of the archives; the office of megas chartoularios administering the homonymous sekretion appears as well. From the 12 th c. some chartoularii appear to undertake military duty and during the 13 th c. the megas chartoularios was an officer of high rank in the court. 2. Ecclesiastical officer, in charge of the archives (close to chartophylax).
	cistern A receptacle for holding rainwater, but also water transported from elsewhere, in order to keep it stored. The cisterns were either covered either open, and they could have more than one compartments.
	dioiketes Middle - Late byzantine era: an official of the fiscal service, whose jurisdiction applied to a certain territory.
	emir (from Arabic amir) Emir meaning "commander" or "general", later also "prince". Also a high title of nobility or office in some Turkic historical states.
	horrearius 1. Rome: official in charge of the operation of the public storage spaces, that principally served the state but, occasionally, the private individuals as well. 2. Byzantium: official of the fiscal service who was in charge of the running of commodities heaped inside the horrea (storage spaces within the borders of the imperial estates).
	Isfendiyar Oğulları A Turkmen dynasty, which established its dominion around Kastamone (Castamonu) in the late 13 th c., under Mongol suzerainty. In the period of 1301-1340, they expanded their dominion as far as Sinope, as independent sovereigns. By 1460 they had passed under Ottoman suzerainty, and so their territory was absorbed in the Ottoman Empire.
	kommerkiarios (commerciarius) An official of the fiscal service in charge of the levying of the tax called commercion (δεκάτη<, 10%), that was imposed over the portage and the selling of articles. The jurisdiction of each commerciarius was exercised either over specific urban centers with vivid commercial activity or over particular widespread territories of the empire. Since the official had been appointed by the emperor himself he used to be called "royal commerciarius". In the Late Byzantine era the commerciarius acted also as an individual entrepreneur who used to merchandise silk for his own interest.
	kommerkion This name had two meanings in Byzantium 1. Commercium (lat.), which in late Roman times designated the frontier cities where exchanges with foreign merchants were authorised. 2. Kommerkion , which was a circulation and sales tax, paid at the customs, and collected on merchandise imported



into the empire and on merchandise reaching Constantinople by the sea. It appears in the sources c. 800 and was also called *dekate*, its rate being 10 percent of the merchandise value.

megas doukas

The commander of the Byzantine fleet. In the Late Byzantine period, the title of the *megas doukas* was assigned to the highest officials of the imperial administration.

paraphylax, castrophylax

In the Middle Byzantine period *paraphylax* was a *sine actu* official. In the Late Byzantine period the term designates a lesser official responsible for the guard of the fortified cities (*castra*); this official appears also under the title of «*castrophylax*».

portolan, portulan

(from latin word “*portus*”, port) a book with nautical instructions (today called “a pilot book”) which gives a description of the coastline and indicates the sailing directions which were to be followed in order to reach a given point of orientation (a port, promontory, island, estuary etc.). It also depicts the ports and anchorages with their navigational peculiarities and the possible approaches to them. The *portulan* is an achievement of the medieval navigation and could be considered as a result from the application of the compass in seafaring during the 12th C.

terminus ante quem (lat.)

Technicality of historical studies for expressing the chronological line, before which an event took place.

theme

A Byzantine term that signifies wide military and administrative units under the administration of a *strategos* (general). The institution was consolidated in the 7th century and was characteristic for the organization and the division of Byzantine Empire at the Middle Byzantine period. The term applies also to the army unit that resided in each administrative unit and was staffed by farmer-soldiers. The thematic system was maintained until the end of Byzantine period. However, in the Later Byzantine period it was used in order to declare mostly tax units.

tourma

(lat. *turma*, meaning squadron) Administrative division of a *theme* in the Middle Byzantine period. A *tourma* was further subdivided into *droungoi* and *banda*.

tourmarch

Civilian and military commander of a *tourma*, subdivision of a *theme*.

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Quotations

The importance of Amisos for the economy of Cherson in Crimea



ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ ἀπὸ Ἀμισσοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ Παφλαγονίας καὶ τῶν Βουκελλαρίων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν πλαγίων τῶν ἀρμενιάκων περάσῃσι γεννήματα, οὐ δύνανται ζῆσαι οἱ Χερσωνίται

Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio, ed. Moravcsik, G., Jenkins, R.J.H. (Washington, D.C., 1967), p. 268.

Directions in the portulans for Amisos

Ἀπὸ τὸ Ἀγγίσι ἕως τὴν Ἀμισὸν μίλια λδ' πρὸς τὸν εὐρον. Ἐγνώρισις τῆς Ἀμισσοῦ εἶναι οὕτως ὅταν κατεβαίνεις ἀπὸ τὸ πέλαγος, θέλεις ἴδει ἀπάνω της βουνὶ μέγα τὸ ὅποιον ἔναι στρογγυλὸν καὶ θέλεις ἴδει τὴν καστρέαν ὅλην καὶ ὅταν ἴδης στὴν παραβολὴν πρῶτον ἀκρωτήρι ἀπλωτον καὶ χαμηλόν, ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἀκρωτήρι ἔναι ἡ Ἁγία Ἄννα τῆς Ἀμισσοῦ

Dellate, A., επιμ., *Les Portulans grecs I* (Liège - Paris 1947), p. 31.13-19.

The sea as an obstacle to the Arab invaders

Ὁ Ἄμερ σὺν τεσσαράκοντα χιλιάσι στρατοῦ ὄμου μὲν τὴν Ἀρμενειακὴν ὄμου δὲ καὶ τὴν πρὸς θάλασσαν Ἀμισὸν ἐξεπόρθει τε καὶ κατεδουλαγῶγει τῷ τοῦ κωλύοντος ἐρημία, ὅτε δὴ καὶ ταῦτον ἐκεῖνῳ τῷ ἄφρονι Ξέρξη λέγεται ποθειον, καὶ κελεύσαι ῥάβδοις τύπτειν τὴν θάλασσαν, ὅτι μὴ πορρωτέρω προκατεστόρεστο ἀλλ' ἐγγὺς αὐτὸν λεηλατοῦντα καταλαμβανομένη κεκώλυκεν

Theophanis Chronographia, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig 1883), pp. 179.14-19.

Chronological Table

Early and Middle Byzantine Periods: Amisos is the centre of exports of cereal to Crimea

863 (most possible): The emir of Melitene sacks Amisos

1070: The Seljuk Turks conquer Amaseia

Middle of the decade 1070: Possible settlement of Armenians from Amaseia to Amisos

11th century: Amisos is transferred from the acropolis to the coast. Peaceful co-existence between Byzantines and Turkmen

1194: Amisos becomes property of the Seljuk sultan Rukn al Din

1204: Amisos becomes a city of the Empire of Trebizond

1214: Possible occupation of Amisos by the Seljuk Turks

1233-1248: A mint begins to operate in Amisos

1285: Genoese settle in Amisos

end of the 13th century: Amisos becomes a source of income for the Seljuk Masud Beg, subject to the Mongols

1363: Georgios Scholares finds shelter in Amisos

1392 or 1394: Bayezid I in Amisos. The Mongols react

1400 and later: Amisos becomes the centre of the imports of cereal from Crimea



1400: The Mongols occupy Sebasteia. Possibly Armenians settle in Amisos

A little after 1400: Possible settlement of Armenians from Sebasteia in Amisos

1404: Amisos becomes a source of income for the Seljuk Mir Suleyman Celebi

1419: Amisos becomes part of the principality of Castamone

a little after 1419: Amisos becomes property of the Ottomans

1421: Three Venetian ships at the harbor of Amisos

1421: Fire destroys the city

1424: Final mention of the Genoese colony Simisso

1449: Georgios Sfrantzis shipwrecked in Samsun

1452 onwards: Decline of Amisos/ Samsun