



Summary :

On May 11th 330 the residents of Constantinople and several guests attended a unique celebration for the inauguration of Constantinople or New Rome, the new capital of Constantine. This celebration was the culmination of a forty-days long festival period, which was marked by a demonstration of the imperial generosity, by the issuing of special commemorative coins and by religious rituals,, both Christian and pagan.

Date

May 11th, 330 A.D.

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. The institution of “imperial capital”

According to the political practice of Late Antiquity the re-foundation of a city as “imperial capital” was not something unusual, particularly from the age of the Tetrarchy and forward. The emperors chose a city of their preference, depending on the focal point of their external affairs’ policy, and built their palace there in order to stay while they were not traveling or campaigning and to govern the empire from there. Thus [Diocletian](#) had chosen [Nicomedia](#) and Galerius Thessalonica. Rome, however, continued to be the capital of the State and center of the Empire.

A few months after his final victory over [Licinius](#) and particularly on the 8th of November 324, [Constantine](#) chose to set the stepping stone for the foundation of his own imperial capital in the former Megarian colony of [Byzantium](#), right on the spot where the Bosphoros met the Sea of Marmara and Europe nearly touched Asia.¹

2. Constantinople as “New Rome”

The transfer of the capital of the state to a new city was not initially within Constantine’s scope. It was in Rome that the emperor built his Triumphal Arch in order to commemorate his victory over his dynastic rivals, and it was there that he celebrated in 326 the anniversary for the twenty years from his first proclamation as [Augustus](#) (vicennalia). During the festivities, however, there were fits of unruly behaviour which revealed to the emperor the fact that the people of Rome perhaps was not entirely on his side. Nor was part of the Senatorial order, which saw in the face of the dynamic emperor a threat for its status quo. Thus, four years after the official “foundation” of the city [Constantine](#) decided to proclaim once more its foundation, this time as “[New Rome](#)”, as new capital of the state (November 4th 328). [Philostorgios](#), transmitting an early Christian tradition, relates that he undertook the task of tracing the city’s new boundaries himself. As he had gone far beyond the older boundaries, the members of his court and the architects who followed him asked him how farther he intended to go. His answer was: “Up to the point where will stop the one who marches in front of me”, thus insinuating that he acted under divine guidance.²

3. The “encaenia” of New Rome

Constantine waited until the completion of the most important works which would attribute to the new capital the necessary prestige; he also waited for the right omens to be given by the official soothsayers of the imperial court. The official inauguration of the new capital took place on May 11th 330, on the namesday of St. Mocius, thus culminating



a series of festivities which had lasted for 40 days.

Actually, as Gilbert Dagron has shown, the foundation of Constantinople was a long procedure over many years, which gradually was epitomized in the tradition into this date.³ The choice of this particular date is very interesting, since May 11th was the nameday of St. Mocius, who was martyred in Byzantium in the years of Diocletian.⁴ St. Mocius, who was considered the patron saint of the city in the early period, before it became «the City of the Theotokos», had a martyrdom in Constantinople from early on. According to the tradition, Constantine I had built it on the site of a temple of Zeus, but it is rather difficult to verify the accuracy of this information.⁵

3.1. The sources

The building of New Rome attracted the attention of early Christian writers, particularly those who wrote historical works. The aim was to attribute a teleological character and to identify the foundation of the new city with the prevailing of the new religion. Socrates Scholasticos, originating from Constantinople, relates that Constantine gave the city his name, but he promulgated a law, according to which the city was to be called “New Rome” and that he built two churches, [Hagia Eirene](#) and the [Holy Apostles](#), the latter of which he had chosen as his own mausoleum.⁶ Eusebios, on the other hand, is less eloquent, and focuses mainly on the personality and the choices of the emperor and not on the “mundane” events which accompanied the transferal of the capital.

The information we have on the celebrations of the “encaenia” of the new city come mainly from later sources, authors of the 6th and the 7th century, and this has as a result the doubt on whether they rely on real events or whether they are the product of the imagination of the authors or the reflection of local folklore, aiming at vesting the event with more splendor than it actually had in its own days. The basic narrations are those in the *Chronikon Paschale*⁷ and the *Chronographia* by [John Malalas](#).⁸ Some information is also preserved in *Patria Constantinopolitana*.⁹ Based on those sources modern historians attempted to reconstruct the atmosphere on the shores of the Bosphoros in that spring of 330, tending perhaps towards exaggeration.¹⁰

3.2. The celebrations

According to the sources and the historical reconstruction, the celebrations for the inauguration of the new city started on April 2nd 330. The emperor, accompanied by the members of the imperial court, went to the centre of the new agora ([Forum Constantini](#)), where they performed a ceremony for the “dedication” of the [column](#) which was built on the spot where Constantine had seen the divine vision which led him to set the boundaries for the new city.¹¹ After forty days of festivities and demonstration of imperial generosity to the inhabitants of the city, the court came back to the same point for installing the statue of the Emperor as Sun-Apollo on the top of the column.¹² This column was a kind of talisman for the city: its seven drums, made of porphyry, had been transferred from [Troy](#), whereas it was said that in its foundations there were placed objects of particular symbolic value, both for the Christians and the Pagans. Among those objects was the stone which Moses had struck so that water sprang out in the desert, some straw from the baskets in which the disciples of Jesus had transported the bread and the fish for the miracle at Galilee, as well as the Palladium, i.e. the statue of Athena which Aeneas had brought with him to Rome. The statue of Constantine as Sun was made of gold and contained a part of the Holy Cross, whereas the seven rays which constituted the crown bore kernels made of the seven nails which had been used at Christ’s Crucifixion.



After the attendants saw the installation of the statue at the top of the column while chanting “Domine”, they proceeded to the [Hippodrome](#). Constantine was dressed in full majesty and he wore, as they say, for the first time a diadem, ornate with precious stones and pearls. Before the chariot race began, in the arena entered a chariot bearing a golden statue of Constantine carrying a statuette of **Tyche**; the chariot was escorted by a squadron of the imperial guard, dressed in ceremonial and luxurious clothes. According to the sources, this statue was carried around in the Hippodrome at the anniversary of the city’s inauguration for at least 200 years later and all the emperors paid their respect to the founder of the city.

After the procession the emperor once more handed away money to the people. It is possible that special [coins](#) had been issued for this purpose and several scholars think that they might have been the coins with the personification of the city and Victory.¹³ The ceremonies close with ceremonial processions and parades in the entire city as well as with a liturgy which took place in Hagia Eirene. The sources, Christian in their majority, do not refer to specific pagan ceremonies for the encaenia, apart from the dedication of the statue. It is, however, rather improbable that no such ceremonies took place, yet it is possible that they did not entail animal sacrifices, since Constantine had already expressed his detest for this kind of religious ceremony.¹⁴

4. The aftermath

In spite of the fact that the descriptions of the inauguration of the city acquired quasi-mythical dimensions and were vested with a providential character, the truth is that the way of celebration and the specific ceremonies created a new model. It seems that Constantine himself was persuaded about the power of propaganda which the impressive ceremonies held. Similar ceremonies took place during the inauguration of the churches built in the Holy Land. In this way there was established a practice which had started already in Diocletian’s times and aimed at stressing the elements which made the imperial court unique, while at the same time they made it look remote from everyday life. This model was followed by later Byzantine emperors. The “proscynesis” (prostration) of the city’s founder in particular remained a living issue for at least two more centuries, whereas the practice of bowing low in front of the emperor was established ever since.

At the level of historical consciousness, on the other hand, the ceremony of the encaenia of Constantinople acquired a particular meaning through the studies of the historians. For many among them it marked the beginning of a new era, the detachment from the old center of power of the empire, namely Rome, and perhaps from the West in general, and the invigoration of “New Rome” and the East. Naturally such a distinction did not take place until 395, i.e. 65 years later, with the political testament of [Theodosius I](#) and even then the Roman Empire was not meant to be two states, but rather two territorial entities. Several historians, though, in their search for landmarks, considered the date of the inauguration of Constantinople as the starting point of the history of the Byzantine Empire.¹⁵ This tendency is particularly evident today, and tends to substitute the earlier version of 324, when Constantine started his reign as sole emperor.¹⁶

1. The Christian writers attributed the choice of the position to a divine guidance. According to Sozomen, *Eccl.Hist.* 2.3, Constantine had initially chosen Troy, due to its symbolic value for the Romans (hometown of Aeneas). The works of the new fortifications of Troy had already started, when God appeared in Constantine’s dream and asked him to chose another location, probably less closely



connected to the empire's pagan past

2. Philostorgius, *Eccl.Hist.* 2.9.
3. Dagron, G., *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris ²1984), p. 33; see also «Chronological table».
4. St. Mocius, a priest in macedonian Amphipolis, was arrested during the persecutions of Diocletian and was submitted to torture (fire, amphitheatre with wild beasts), but God always protected him and he remained unscathed. Finally he was sent to the city of Byzantium, where he was decapitated.
5. Janin, R., *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin I: Le siège de Constantinople et le Patriarcat Œcuménique*, tome iii: *Les églises et les monastères* (Paris ²1969), pp. 354-5. Dagron, G., *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris ²1984), p. 395. Supposedly Constantine built a church in his honour, where he transferred the relics of the saint, probably in an effort to reconstitute his memory and to stress the fact that the persecutions of the Christians were a thing of the past. See also Sozomen, *Eccl. His.* 8.17. For later sources related to the cult of St. Mocius as well as the erection of his church on a former pagan temple see *Patria*, Preger Th.(ed.), *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitarum*, v. I (Leipzig 1901), p. 19.
6. Socr. Schol., *Eccl. Hist.* 1.16. The church of the Holy Apostles was situated on the site of the present-day Fatih Camii. Doubts have been formulated as to whether this was actually a church or simply a mausoleum. According to descriptions, the interesting point was that in the building were placed sarcophagi made of porphyry, which were representing the tombs of the Apostles, whereas one among them was destined for the burial of the emperor, who thus wanted to be considered as one of the apostles.
7. Dindorf, L. (ed.), *Chronicon Paschale* (Bonnae 1832), also in English translation by Whitby, M. and M., *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 A.D.* (Liverpool 1989).
8. Dindorf, L. (ed.), *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia* (Bonnae 1831). See also Jeffreys, E., Jeffreys M., Scott, R., *The Chronicle of John Malalas* (Sydney 1986).
9. Preger, Th. (ed.), *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum*, v. I-II (Leipzig 1901), particularly the "Parastaseis syntomai chronikai" and the "Patria Constantinopolitarum" by Hesychios. See also Dagron, G., *Constantinople imaginaire : études sur le recueil des Patria* (Paris 1984).
10. The earliest such effort was by Lathoud, D., ., "La consécration et le dédicace de Constantinople", *Echos d' Orient* 23 (1924) p. 289-314 and 24 (1925) p. 180-201. Next came the description by Janin, R., *Constantinople Byzantine: Développement urbain et répertoire topographique* (Paris 19642) p. 18-19, 23-26 and finally the landmark book for the study of Late Antiquity by Dagron, G., *Naissance d'une capitale: Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 a 451* (Paris 1974).
11. This is the column Çemberlitaş which still stands today in the homonymous area on the central street Divan Yolu. The column suffered extensive damage by a fire and was supported with iron rings. The statue of Constantine is not extant, whereas the column itself has been under restoration for several years
12. For this statue as well as for the identification of Constantine with Sol Invictus see Preger, T., "Konstantinos-Helios", *Hermes* 36 (1901), p. 457-469
13. Odahl, C.M., *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (London-New York 2004), p. 243-244 and fn. 21.
14. Although it has become the issue of an extensive scholarly debate, the article 16.10.1 of the Theodosian Code, which constitutes the only testimony on the anti-pagan legislation of Constantine himself, speaks clearly of a ban on sacrifice for private purposes, in an effort to reduce superstition. Sacrifices were allowed only in cases when public buildings were damaged by natural disasters and thus there was need for figuring out the gods' will for the common welfare
15. It is indicative that this date was adopted by a contemporary important exhibition on Byzantine Art, which is now running in the Royal Academy of Arts in London(<http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/byzantium/about/>) as well as the guidebook of the exhibition, edited by Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330-1453*, in which are featuring more than 100 prominent Byzantinists.
16. The date of 324 was first proposed by A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine empire, 324-1453* which was published for the first time in the '20s and



has been ever since translated in several languages

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Glossary :

	Augustus A title initially given to Octavian in 27 BC, a few years after his victory over Mark Anthony in Actium. In Greek the epithet means "Honoured". Eventually, the title was used to complement the names of the Roman emperors.
	Tyche (Fortuna) A symbol of wealth and prosperity, Tyche was considered a deity in the Graeco-roman world (it latin version being Fortuna) and it was often associated with certain cities, as an expression of their power and success. Its iconographic expression was a personification of the city in the form of a goddess of great importance for this particular city.

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Quotations

Foundation of Constantinople according to *Chronicon Paschale*

In the time of the aforementioned consuls, Constantine the celebrated emperor departed from Rome, and, while staying at Nicomedia metropolis of Bithynia, made visitations for a long time to Byzantium. He renewed the first wall of the city of Byzas, and after making considerable extensions also to the same wall he joined thee to the ancient wall of the city and named it Constantinople; he also completed the Hippodrome, adorning it with works in bronze and with every excellence, and made in it a box for imperial viewing in likeness of the one which is in Rome. And he made a great Palace near the same Hippodrome, by way of the Kochlias, as it is called. And he also built a forum which was large and exceedingly fine; and he set in the middle a great porphyry column of the ban stone worthy of admiration, and he set on top of the same column a great statue of himself with rays of light on his head, a work in bronze which he had brought from Phrygia. The same emperor Constantine secretly took away from Rome the Palladium, as it is called, and placed it in the Forum built by him, beneath the column of his monument, as certain of the Byzantines say who have heard it by tradition. And after making bloodless sacrifice, he named the Tyche [the guardian spirit] of the city renewed by him Anthusa.

Chronicon Paschale, tr. M and M Whitby, Liverpool 1989, p. 15-16.

Foundation of Constantinople according to Philostorgios

Τὴν τοίνυν Θράκην Κωνσταντίνος καταλαβὼν ἐς τὰ μάλιστα δὴ τότε εὐθηνουμένην, καὶ τὸ Βυζάντιον καταμαθὼν ὡς ἄριστα γῆς τε καὶ θαλάττης ἔχει, ἰδρῦθη δὴ ἐνταῦθα· καὶ τὸν αὐχένα τῆς χερρονήσου διαλαβὼν (χερρονήσος γὰρ ἔστι τὸ χωρίον), ἐτείχιζεν ἐκ θαλάττης εἰς θάλατταν, ἐντὸς τὰ τε προάστεια καὶ τοὺς πλησίον λόφους ποιούμενος, ὡς τῆς κτιζομένης πόλεως διὰ πλάτους περιβολὴν μοῖραν εἶναι μικρὰν τὴν ἀρχαίαν πόλιν. ἔνθα γὰρ νῦν ὁ πορφυροῦς καὶ μέγας ἐστὶ κίων ἐστῶς ὁ τὸν αὐτοῦ κολοττὸν φέρων, ἐντεῦθεν τὴν ἀρχὴν ποιησάμενος, τὸ λοιπὸν ἅπαν ἐπὶ τε ἑκατέραν θάλατταν καὶ τὴν μεσόγειον ἀπλούμενον τῆς ἑαυτοῦ παλάμης καὶ δυνάμεως ἐξήνυσεν ἔργον. Ἀκήκοα δὲ ἔγωγε καὶ τοῦτο τῶν πρῶτων καὶ ἀξιολόγων διηγουμένων ὡς ὁ Κωνσταντίνος, ὀπιπνίκα τὰς πύλας ὀριοῦμενος τοῦ τείχους ἠγείτο τῶν ἐπομένων ἀφ' οὗ μέτρον τὸν περίβολον ἔδει τὴν ἐργασίαν λαβεῖν, ἥει τὸ πρόσω βάδην τε χωρῶν καὶ τὸ δόρυ τῆ χειρὶ φέρων. ὡς δὲ πρῶτον ὑπερβάς λόφον ἐπὶ δεῦτερον ἦει, καὶ τοῦτον ὑπερελθὼν ἐπὶ τὸ πρόσω προῦβαινε μείζον μήκος διαμετρούμενος ἢ τοῖς ἀκολουθοῦσιν ἐφαίνετο μετρίως ἔχειν, προσελθὼν <τις> ἀπὸ τῶν παρρησίαν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀγόντων ἤρητο· «ἕως ποῦ, δέσποτα;» ὁ δὲ διαρρήδην ἀποκρινάμενος· «ἕως ἂν, ἔφη, ὁ ἐμπροσθέν μου στῆ», ὡς γενέσθαι σαφές ὅτι ἀγγέλων τις ἐώκει προπορεύεσθαι τὰ μέτρα παραδώσαν, ὡς πάνυ γε δὴ θεῶ κεχαρισμένως τῆς πόλεως ταύτης οἰκίζομένης, οὐκ ἔλαττον ἢ τὸ πάλαι τῆς Ἱερουσαλήμ· καὶ γὰρ καὶ ἡμελλε κἀνταῦθα κοινὸν συστήσασθαι πρυτανεῖον εὐσεβείας. ἕως γοῦν ὅποι τὸ φαινόμενον εἶδος χωροῦν ἔπειτα ἔστη καὶ διαλυθὲν ἦν ἀφανές, ἐκεῖ καὶ ὁ Κωνσταντίνος παραγενόμενος τὸ δόρυ τε ἐπήξατο καὶ ἔφη διαρρήδην· «ἕως ἐνταῦθα», ἔνθα καὶ νῦν εἰσὶν αἱ μεγάλαι πύλαι τῆς πόλεως. Τὴν δὲ πόλιν κτίσας ἔνδοξον αὐτὴν ἐκάλεσε Ῥώμην, οὕτω κατὰ τὴν τῶν Ἰταλῶν γλῶτταν «Ἄλμα Ῥώμα» τὴν προσηγορίαν αὐτῆς θέμενος. καὶ βουλήν τε ἐν αὐτῇ σύγκλητον ἰδρύσατο καὶ σιτηρεσίου δαπάνην πολυτελεστάτην τοῖς οἰκίτορσι κατένειμε, καὶ τὸν ἄλλον ἐν αὐτῇ τῆς πολιτείας κατεστήσατο κόσμον, ὡς ἀρκεῖν εἰς ἀντίπαλον κλέος τῆ προτέρα Ῥώμῃ.

Vita Constantini Cod. Angelic. A f. 25r [Franchi de' Cav. 97, s. ob. S. 17, 33]

See also. [folgt Exc. Tripart. = Polyd. 268, 5—11. Theophan. 23, 22—27. Bios di Costantino ed. Guidi Rendic. Accad. Lincei 1907 S. 336, 15—19]. Ebd. f. 25v

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English translation

CHAP. 9.--He says that, in the twenty-eighth year of his reign, Constantine turned Byzantium into the city of Constantinople; and that, when he went to mark out the circuit of the city, he walked round it with a spear in his hand; and that when his attendants thought that he was measuring out too large a space, one of them came up to him and asked him, How far, O prince?" and that the emperor answered, "Until he who goes before me conies to a stop ;" by this answer clearly manifesting that some heavenly power was heading him on, and teaching him what he ought to do. Philostorgius adds, that Constantine, after building the city, called it



"Alma Roma,," which means in the Latin tongue, "Glorious." He also states, that the emperor established there a senate, and distributed among the citizens a copious allowance of corn, and adorned the city in other particulars with such sumptuous magnificence, that it became a rival to ancient Rome in splendor.

Ecclesiastical History of Philostorgius, as epitomized by Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople. Translated by Edward Walford, Late Scholar of Balliol College, Oxford. London, 1855

Chronological Table

Chronology outline for the foundation of Constantinople:

Thus we may formulate the following chronology outline, which of course is not entirely certain, but it is very likely:

September 18, 324: Victory of Constantine over Licinius in Chryssoupolis.

November 324: Constantine accords his son Constantius the title of Caesar while formally decides the foundation of Constantinople in the city of Byzantium, which he refurbishes. On this day, the ceremony of *limitatio* (defining the limits of the city) or of *limitatio-inauguratio* (?) took place, defining the new perimeter of Byzantium-Constantinople. The Emperor appears for the first time with a pearl diadem.

In 325 the major building projects start.

November 26, 328: Constantine is present at the ceremony of *inauguratio*, which marks the beginning of construction of the land walls.

May 11, 330: Celebration of the city's consecration and dedication (*consecratio-dedicatio*). This date is fixed throughout Byzantine history as the date of birth of Constantinople.

330-336: Construction works were of course not complete in 330. Julian says that "It took Constantine nearly ten years to build the city that bears his name." Constantinople was undoubtedly a city under construction until his tricennialia, which was celebrated first in Nicomedia in 335, and then with glory in Constantinople in July of 336, while the vicennialia had only been celebrated in Rome.

Very soon, tradition gathered in a single year all this ten-year period and summarized it in a single celebration, that of May 11, 330.

After Dagron, G., *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris 1984), p. 33 (in French).