



Armenians in Constantinople

Summary :

The Armenians, both as an ethnic group and as individuals, played an important role in the history of the multiethnic Byzantine Empire, as well as in the political and cultural life of Constantinople. Their presence in the Empire was prompted by political events unfolding in Armenia that throughout its long history was subjected to territorial expansions of its powerful neighbors — Byzantine and Persian Empires. The Middle Byzantine centuries were heavily dominated by emperors, nobles, and military leaders of Armenian descent.

Date

4th-15th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. The Armenian presence in Constantinople: An overview

1.1. Early Byzantine period

The first significant wave of Armenians coming into the Byzantine territory was prompted by the defeat of the great military leader Vartan Mamikonian at the Battle of Avarayr (also known as the Battle of Vartanantz) in 451 and the eventual submission of Armenia by the Sassanian Empire. Armenia turned for help and support to its western neighbor, leading to the immigration of some of Armenia's aristocracy. Mamikonian family members, like many others who came, entered the government and military structure, paving the way for the later successes of Armenians within the Empire.

From the sixth century onwards the Armenian element became especially strong in Byzantium. Armenians, together with the [Italians](#) and the [Jews](#), were one of the three richest merchant groups. They also occupied a prominent place in the armies of [Justinian I](#) and in his palace guard. This was even more true for the period following the negotiations between the Persian king Chosrow II (Khosrau II) and the Byzantine emperor [Maurice](#) in 591, when substantial [territories](#) with Armenian population came under Byzantine control. This event strengthened the former political and cultural exchanges and prompted influx of Armenians into the Byzantine territory, increasing the Armenian presence in the capital where some of the newcomers became active in the administration, and in the army where their numbers increased considerably. Furthermore, Caucasus, and Armenian lands in particular, became the prime source of new military conscripts for Byzantium after the province of Illyricum, from which most of the soldiers were previously drafted, was run over and displaced by the Avaro-Slav invasion.

In the seventh century the immigration wave became even stronger after Armenia was conquered by the Arabs between 639-642. Another element that contributed to immigration was the rise of the [Paulician sect](#) in Armenia, the devotees of which had been driven away from their homes sometime before 662, and settled in the Byzantine parts of [Asia Minor](#).¹

More came about 790. Of those who immigrated many belonged to the aristocracy and were welcomed by the Emperor and given lands. The location of the lands granted to them is not specified, but it can be added that at least some took up residence in the capital, entering government and military service in which their compatriots already occupied important positions.



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1.2. Middle Byzantine period

The mass migrations that have marked Early Byzantine period subsided in the ninth century, but Armenian presence in the capital was more keenly felt than ever before. In fact, the Middle Byzantine period has been called by some the "Greco-Armenian centuries" because most of the emperors of this period were of Armenian descent and the Armenians were frequently at the helm of the cultural life of the capital.

The number of Byzantine Emperors of Armenian origin is astounding and can be attested already in the Early Byzantine centuries.² However, it was not until the rise of [Basil I](#) and the establishment of the so-called [Macedonian dynasty](#) that a royal house of Armenian descent dominated the throne in [Constantinople](#). From 867 to 1056 there was not a single ruler on the Byzantine throne that was not at least in part Armenian.³

After Basil I ascended the throne the number of Armenians in the empire increased considerably. He conquered territories in the eastern parts of Asia Minor, largely inhabited by Armenians. With the Byzantine offensive along the eastern frontier in 927, and the annexation of the territory around Melitene, that number was further increased. It is worth mentioning that during the eleventh century, 10-15 percent of the Byzantine aristocracy was of Armenian origin.⁴ The [Battle of Manzikert in 1071](#), and the ensuing loss of the eastern and central parts of Asia Minor to the armies of the [Seljuks](#), brought to an end Armenian immigration and their dominant role in Byzantine affairs. During the [Komnenian period](#) (1081-1185) fewer Armenian nobles entered the ranks of the Byzantine aristocracy, maybe due to the fact that the Armenian nobility tended to establish independent princedoms in [Cilicia](#).⁵

1.3. Later Byzantine period

It is indicative that Armenian descriptions of Constantinople appear during the 13th century, a fact that implies the presence of Armenians, even as travellers, in the Byzantine capital.⁶ The Armenians during the last period of the Byzantine Empire continued to live in [Constantinople](#), as well as in other parts of the empire, until the end of the Byzantine era, and well into the [Ottoman centuries](#). Nonetheless they were primarily merchants and did not seem to play a significant role in the administration.⁷

2. Focusing on the activity of the Armenian element

2.1. Military and government

From the ninth century until the Crusades, numerous military commanders and administrative functionaries of Armenian origin have influenced the history of the Byzantium. Admiral ([droungarios tou ploimou](#)) Alexios Musele commanded the Byzantine fleet in the Battle of Pigae against the Bulgarians in 922. The most famous of Armenian nobles was Mleh, or Melias (d. 934), whose military successes were later attributed to [Digenes Akrites](#), the hero of the eponymous Byzantine epic.⁸ General [John Curcuas](#) successfully led the victorious Byzantine army in the Battle of [Melitene](#) in 934. General [Bardas Phokas](#) (Caesar Bardas) played an important role in battles for the imperial throne during the reigns of [Nikephoros II Phokas](#), [John I Tzimiskes](#), and Basil II, and was himself at one point proclaimed emperor by his troops. [Bardas Skleros](#), of another prominent Armenian family, was a general under John Tzimiskes.



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He famously defended Constantinople against the armies of Svyatoslav I of Kiev in 970, subdued the rebellion of Bardas Phokas, and came close to assuming the throne. Other members of the Armenian nobility that left their mark on the political and military life of Byzantium include the families of [Bourtzes](#), Theodorokanoi, [Dalassenoi](#), Taronites, Tornikioi, Vrachamios, and [Kekaumenoi](#), all of which held important posts in the Byzantine state between the ninth and the eleventh century. It is worth mentioning that within the ranks of [Romanos IV](#)'s troops is recorded the presence of Armenians.⁹

2.3. The Church

Armenians played prominent roles in the religious life of Byzantium. Empress Theodora, sister of Bardas Phokas and wife of the Emperor [Theophilos](#) (r. 828-842), was the champion of icons in the age of [Iconoclasm](#) and was later sainted by the Orthodox Church. Armenians were so well-integrated into Byzantine society that many of them were converted to Orthodoxy and achieved the highest positions within the church hierarchy. Atticus, the [Patriarch of Constantinople](#) (406-425), was an Armenian, as were his successors, John VII Grammatikos (837-843), Photios I (858-867 and 877-886), [Theophylaktos Lekapenos](#) (933-956), [Michael II Curcuas](#) (1143-46), and Theodosios I Boradiotes (1179-83), who vehemently opposed the union with the Catholic Church and was one of the harshest critics of Islam.

2.4. Cultural and intellectual life

Cultural and intellectual life of the capital was equally dominated by Armenians. In 848, general Bardas Phokas reorganized the *Pandidakterion*, a school of [higher education](#) that run in the [Magnauro](#), at the [Great Palace](#) complex; the most famous of the scholars who taught at the School in the ninth century were also of Armenian origins, such as the patriarchs John VII Grammatikos, responsible for laying the theological foundations for the renewal of Iconoclasm in 815, and Photios I, the defender of icons and the famous erudite. Another scholar who taught in the school was Leo the Mathematician (ca. 790-869), a great scholar, who in addition to writing important philosophical, philological and literary treatises, transcribed ancient Greek texts, and invented machinery that was used to warn the city of foreign attacks from the sea.

After the [earthquake](#) of 989, the great dome of Constantinopolitan cathedral of [Hagia Sophia](#) had collapsed. An Armenian architect, Trdat, one of the most famous architects of his time, was chosen by Emperor Basil II to undertake this difficult project, which he completed successfully.¹⁰

The Armenian element, as we saw above, was to a great extent assimilated into the Byzantine state, socially as well as ideologically. It is also characteristic that the aristocratic families of Armenian descent in Byzantine territory and in the capital in particular, were orthodox; even if they had been [Chalcedonians](#) in their native lands, they seem to have been converted to Orthodoxy already in the first generation that was installed in imperial territories.¹¹ On the other hand, the sources attest the distrust and even the prejudice of the Byzantines towards Armenians,¹² while Byzantine writers often care to mention specifically that a certain prominent person is Armenian, or of Armenian descent. But it is uncertain to what degree did the rather negative byzantine attitude towards the Armenians (an attitude dictated by their political and religious interrelation) apply to the assimilated in the Byzantine society aristocracy of Armenian origins.¹³ The Armenian sources for their part tend to reverse the negative image towards the Byzantines, but we cannot be certain that this mistrust attested in both sides' sources is always reliable evidence for the armeno-byzantine



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relations.¹⁴

2.5. Urban demographics

Supposedly, the Armenians of Constantinople were installed in the vicinity of the harbor in their own separate quarter on the shores of the [Sea of Marmara](#) between the modern Samatya and Kumkapi neighborhoods, and also in what are now neighborhoods of Beşiktaş, [Kuruçeşme](#) and Üsküdar. However, the sources on the Armenian presence in Constantinople are scarce and therefore it is unclear if there was actually a solid Armenian community in the city - although the presence of Armenians in the city is undoubted- and where exactly were they installed. In any case, such Armenian presence must have been distinct from the Byzantine aristocracy of Armenian descent.¹⁵ The Armenians were allowed to erect their own churches, as it can be gathered by scattered references in the sources. Armenian cemeteries, attributed to the Ottoman period, were situated between the modern neighborhoods of Taksim and Harbiye, but were obliterated by high rise office and apartments blocks built after the World War II.

1. See N. Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy. A Study of the Origin and Development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern Provinces of the Byzantine Empire*, The Hague - Paris 1967.
2. The following Emperors were fully or partially Armenian: Heraclius (r. 610-641), Mezezius (Mecetius) (r. 668-669), Philippicus Bardanes (Vardan) (r. 711-713), Artavasdos (Artavazd) (r. 741/42-743), Leo V the Armenian (r. 813-820), and Michael III (r. 842-867).
3. The list includes some of the most illustrious emperors: Basil I (r. 867-886), Leo VI the Wise (Leo the Philosopher) (r. 886-912); Alexander (r. 912-913), Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (the Purple-born) (r. 913-959), Romanos I Lekapenos (r. 919-944), Romanos II (r. 959-963), Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963-969), John I Tzimiskes (r. 969-976), Basil II Boulgaroktonos (the Bulgar-slayer) (r. 976-1025), Constantine VIII (r. 1025-1028), Zoe (r. 1028-1050), Constantine IX Monomachos (r. 1042-1055), and Theodora (r. 1055-1056). In fact, some scholars have used the term "Armenian dynasty" instead of the more widely known "Macedonian dynasty", see Chahin, M., *The Kingdom of Armenia: A history* (London 2001), p. 232.
4. A. Kazhdan, 'Armenians', in Kazhdan A. P. (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 1, New York - Oxford 1991, p. 181-182, esp. 182.
5. A. P. Kazhdan – A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 1985), p. 179.
6. K. N. Ciggaar, *Western Travellers to Constantinople: The West and Byzantium, 962-1204* (Leiden - New York - Köln 1996), p. 48.
7. A. Kazhdan, 'Armenians', in Kazhdan A. P. (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 1, New York - Oxford 1991, p. 181-182, esp. 182.
8. G. Dédéyan, "Mleh le Grand, stratège de Lycandos", *Revue des études arméniennes* 15 (1981), pp. 73-102.
9. A. P. Kazhdan – A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 1985), p. 172.
10. K. L. Organesian, *Zodehii Trdat* (Erevan 1951); Π. Μυλωνάς, 'Η επισκευή του τροούλλου της Αγίας Σοφίας', *Αρχαιολογία* 32 (1989), pp. 59-60; Ch. Bouras, 'Master Craftsmen, Craftsmen, and Building Activities in Byzantium', in Laiou A.E. (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C. 2002), p. 551.
11. Cheynet, J.-C., *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963-1210)* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 9, Paris 1990), p. 283. Cf. Brousselle, I., «L'intégration des arméniens dans l'aristocratie byzantine au IXe siècle», in Martin-Hisard B. et al. (éd.), *L'Arménie et Byzance. Histoire et Culture* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 12, Paris 1996), p. 50.
12. Kazhdan, A., 'Armenians', in Kazhdan A. P. (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 1, New York - Oxford 1991, p. 181-182, esp. 182.



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13. According to the scholars, it is even uncertain to what extent can we speak of «Armenians» when referring to such families, since they were so much byzantinized. See Garsoïan, N. G., «The problem of Armenian integration into the Byzantine Empire», in Ahrweiler, H. - Laiou, A. E., (ed.), *Studies on the internal diaspora of the Byzantine Empire* (Washington D.C. 1998), pp. 93-103. Cf. the passage from this same article in the «Quotations».
14. Garsoïan, N. G., «The problem of Armenian integration into the Byzantine Empire», in Ahrweiler, H. - Laiou, A. E., (ed.), *Studies on the internal diaspora of the Byzantine Empire* (Washington D.C. 1998), p. 67.
15. Garsoïan, N. G., «The problem of Armenian integration into the Byzantine Empire», in Ahrweiler, H. - Laiou, A. E., (ed.), *Studies on the internal diaspora of the Byzantine Empire* (Washington D.C. 1998), pp. 58-61.

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Glossary :

	Chalcedonian A follower and supporter of the orthodox doctrine expounded at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 ("one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Single-Born, in two natures"), which condemned the heretical teachings of Eutyches (Eutychianism) and Nestorius (Nestorianism) and Monophysitism in general and recognised the Virgin Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God).
	droungarios tou ploimou ("droungarios of the fleet") Commander of the byzantine fleet stationed Constantinople. Droungarios tou ploimou is first mentioned in the midle 9th C (Taktikon of Uspenski).

Quotations

Armenian presence in Constantinople

Finally, there is some evidence that Armenians were residing in the capital, although their presence in Constantinople is poorly documented. Citing the late 12th-C. *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, Peter Charanis speaks of an Armenian colony in the city, but gives no details to support this assertion beyond the presence of Armenians in defence of the city during the siege of 626. These may, however, have been some of Heraclius' recruits, rather than permanent civilian inhabitants. [...] Anna Komnena, in her turn, noted the presence of a large number of Armenians in the city at the time of the trial of Neilos of Calabria around 1094; here too, it is not altogether clear whether these were visitors or permanent residents. Given these assertions, it is curious that no Armenian quarter has been recorded in Constantinople, even though those of other nations have been identified.[...]

To be sure, distinguished Armenians, such as Vardan II Mamikonean and the *kat'olikos* Yovhannes II Gabelean late in the 6th C., the young Bagratid king Asot II in 914, or King Gagik II of Ani and the *kat'olikos* Petros I Getadarj visited and even resided in the capital for a time, albeit not always of their free will. By their nature, however, such episodes were necessarily brief. Some of the great noble families of Armenian descent unquestionably had palaces in Constantinople. We hear of the house of Alexios Musele and of the lengthy negotiations of the Taronite princes with Leo VI and Romanos I Lekapenos to keep the "house of Barbaros" in the capital, as well as a suburban estate. Other aristocratic families must also have moved from the eastern frontier as part of the gradual "Constantinopolization" of the aristocracy, but, as we shall see, the degree to which they were still to be considered "Armenian" is open to question.

Finally, we are told by Michael the Syrian that an Armenian church had existed in the city until the time of Alexios I Komnenos when it was burned. Yet more than two centuries later, the patriarch Athanasios I (1303-9) still complained of the harm done to the



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Orthodox by the presence in Constantinople of Armenians and of their church, whose location unfortunately remains unknown. Scattered and unsatisfactory though these indications may be, they nevertheless identify some degree of Armenian residence in the capital, as well as throughout most of the empire, over a long period. Of necessity, such a massive and pervasive Armenian presence made it impossible for the imperial authorities to ignore their existence, while simultaneously serving as evidence that the Armenians, on their part, had also achieved a *modus vivendi*.

Garsoïan, N. G., «The problem of Armenian integration into the Byzantine Empire», in Ahrweiler, H. - Laiou, A. E., (ed.), *Studies on the internal diaspora of the Byzantine Empire* (Washington D.C. 1998), pp. 58-61.