



Topography of Byzantine Constantinople

Summary :

Constantinople (*Κωνσταντινούπολις*, "the city of Constantine"), the capital of the Byzantine empire, was founded in 324 by emperor Constantine I (306/324-337) on the southern part of the Bosphorus, on the site of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium. From the beginning it was also named New Rome. In subsequent centuries Constantinople flourished considerably, becoming renowned for its expansive wealth and beauty. Constantinople's conquest by the Ottomans in May 29, 1453, put an end to Byzantium as a political entity.

Date

324-1453

1. Byzantium and the city of Constantine

[Constantine](#) chose for his new capital the site of Byzantium, a colony of the Greek city of Megara, which was first settled in the 7th century BC. [New Rome](#) was founded in 324 and dedicated on the 11th of May 330. Constantine selected the site apparently because he appreciated its strategic advantages. Byzantium was incorporated in the new city along with several of its ancient structures. The three pagan temples on the acropolis (on the Seraglio point) dedicated to [Aphrodite](#), [Artemis](#), and the Sun God were left untouched.

The city was equipped with two [ports](#) inside the walls, the Bosphorion or Proosphorion on the 5th region and the Neorion on the 6th, with an [agora](#) next to them, what later became the Strategion. [Constantinople](#) had a [hippodrome](#), the erection of which according to the tradition was started by [Septimius Severus](#) and completed by Constantine, public baths, and an aqueduct, which was constructed by [Hadrian](#). A [new wall](#) was constructed approximately 3 km to the west of the ancient walls of Byzantium. Constantine also constructed a forum (agora) just outside the ancient walls (known as the [Forum Constantini](#)), of which only the central porphyry [column](#) survives, today known as Çemberlitaş.

A main colonnaded avenue, later to be called the [Mese](#), transversed the city from east to west. It started from the [Milion](#), located in the [Augustaion](#) square to the northwest of [Hagia Sophia](#). At about 1 km west of the Forum Constantini, the avenue forked, with one branch leading southwest to the [Golden Gate](#), and the other leading to the northwest. The palace was located to the southeast of the city, between the hippodrome and the sea of Marmara. Only three churches can be attributed to Constantine, apart from his mausoleum on the site of the (later) church of the Holy Apostles: [Hagia Eirene](#), which served as the cathedral, and two martyria dedicated to the local martyrs Akakios and Mokios. Thus, the city retained its pagan character.¹

2. From Constance II to the end of Iconoclasm

2.1. The city

The needs of a rapidly increasing population incited several measures that altered the urban fabric of the city.² Two new ports were constructed: the port of Julian (portus novus, 362), was located to the east of the [Great Palace](#) in the Propontis; only a few years later the port of [Theodosios I](#) was also constructed on the sea of Marmara.³ Constantinople was equipped with several [granaries](#), primarily located close to the Golden Horn. In order to address the lack of natural sources of the water in the city the [aqueduct system](#) was significantly enlarged and extended to as far as Bizye in Thrace or even further west. The work begun by Constance and was completed by [Valens](#) in 373.⁴

The construction of a new set of land walls by Theodosios II (or rather by the [praetorian prefect](#) Anthemios) provided the city with a formidable defense system.⁵ The [Theodosian walls](#), completed by 413, were located approximately 1.5 km to the west of the Constantinian walls. Parts of them still survive today. Evidently, these walls also served to protect the newly constructed water system; three large cisterns were located in the area between the Constantinian and Theodosian walls, an area that was sparsely populated throughout the Byzantine period. Constantinople numbered approximately 80 covered [cisterns](#), most of which were built between the 4th and the 7th centuries, including two surviving in the area around Hagia Sophia: the Philoxenos cistern (now Binbirdirek) and the Basilike (now Yerebatan).⁶ Constantinople was further beautified with the addition of two fora, that of Theodosios (Forum Tauri, 393) to the northwest of the forum of Constantine, and that of Arkadios (or of Xerolophos, 403), on the southern branch of the Mese.⁷ Both were decorated with a historiated column with spiral reliefs inspired by the columns of [Trajan](#) and [Marcus Aurelius](#) in Rome. There were two more public spaces, the Amastrianos and the Forum Bovis, located between Xerolophos and the Forum Tauri.

The *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*, an anonymous Latin description composed during the reign of Theodosios II, offers invaluable and [unique statistical information](#) about the city: in the first half of the 5th century Constantinople had 14 churches,² Senate houses, 5 palaces, 8 public and 153 private baths, 4 fora, 4 harbors, 5 warehouses, 2 theaters, 4 cisterns, and 4,388 houses. Towards the end of the 5th century the sea walls were constructed, fortifying the city along the sea of Marmara and the Golden Horn.⁸ In the 5th century the [Long Walls](#) or the Wall of [Anastasios](#) were built, approximately 65 km west of Constantinople.⁹

The first temple dedicated to Hagia Sophia (divine wisdom, i.e. justice), the Great Church of the Byzantines, was completed by [Constantius II](#) in 360 and was burned down in 404.¹⁰ Theodosios II rebuilt it in 415. Situated to the south of the cathedral was the Augustaion, an enclosed open space, decorated with several monuments. Hagia Sophia was destroyed for the second time during the [Nika Riot](#) in 532.

The reign of [Justinian I](#) brought about renewed building activity after a series of fires and circus riots (such as the aforementioned Nika riot of 532) had destroyed large parts of the city. Justinian's constructions included more than 30 churches, such as Hagia Sophia, the cathedral of Constantinople, the church of Hagia Eirene, Sts. Sergios and Bakchos,¹¹ and the church of the [Virgin of Pege](#).¹² Justinian I also rebuilt the parts of the palace that were destroyed by the riot. Another great patron of the arts was the [patricia](#) Anicia Juliana, who built or repaired several churches in the city, including [St. Polyeuktos](#) (524-527), whose substructures were excavated in 1960s.¹³

The Great Palace continued to be expanded. A large peristyle court, which preceded an apsed hall and was decorated by splendid floor mosaics, dates to the 6th or the 7th century.

2.2. The citizens

The population of the city began to decline, as indicated by various incidents.¹⁴ Starting in the sixth century Constantinople suffered from severe [outbreaks of the plague](#), of which the one erupted in 542 might have killed half the population of the city, or even more. In 618 the regular grain supply from Egypt ceased to flow into the capital and granaries seem to have disappeared. In 626 the [Avars](#) destroyed the aqueduct of Valens, which was only repaired in 768 by [Constantine V](#).¹⁵ Apparently the inhabitants of the city were so few that the extra water was not needed. Furthermore, the port capacity of the city was reduced to one fourth of that of the fifth century. The *Miracles of St. Artemios* (7th century), however, portray a vibrant city, visited by people from as far as Alexandria and Africa.¹⁶

2.3. The transition

It is during the period from the 6th century onwards that a change in mentality becomes increasingly noticeable: because of the devastating effect of the bubonic plague of 746-747, the dead started to be buried within the city walls, a practice which would have been unimaginable earlier;¹⁷ public buildings, such as baths, were abandoned; and some of the city's fora were turned into livestock markets. Furthermore, [sources](#) such as the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* and the *Patria* indicate that the plethora of ancient statues that decorated the city were treated with considerable suspicion and mistrust.¹⁸

3. From the 9th c. to 1204

Constantinople started to recover during the 9th century.¹⁹ The population increased steadily and the city might have had as many as 400,000 inhabitants by the beginning of the 13th century.²⁰ Emperor [Theophilos](#) (r. 829-842) repaired the sea walls and made additions to the Great Palace. He also built the Bryas palace in the suburbs, inspired by Arab models. The *vita Basilii* relates the extensive building activity of [Basil I](#) (r. 867-886). This was restricted, however, primarily to churches, which were either built anew or restored, and palaces. One of the most celebrated foundations of Basil I was the [Nea Ekklesia](#) inside the complex of the palace.²¹

3.1. Monastic foundations

A significant characteristic of medieval Constantinople was the proliferation of urban monasteries. Building such monasteries, which had a multitude of functions including education and philanthropy, became sort of a fashion among emperors and members of the aristocracy. Indeed, 100 new religious foundations have been recorded for the period from 750 to 1204, the majority of which were monasteries.²² Among the most important of such institutions were the monasteries of [Theotokos Peribleptos](#), located to the southwest of the city, built between 1030 and 1034 by Emperor Romanos III Argyros;²³ the monastery of [St. George at Mangana](#), located to the east of the Akropolis and constructed by Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055), along with a palace and a hospital; 24 and the monastery of [Pantokrator](#) on the fourth hill, sponsored by Emperor [John II Komnenos](#).

3.2. The Great Palace

The form of the Great Palace is sufficiently known through some 10th-century documents, especially the *De Cerimoniis* compiled by Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, in which described in detail the court ceremonial. Because of



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the additions made throughout the centuries by various emperors the layout of the place was highly irregular, comprising of structures of diverse forms, gardens, and sporting grounds. In the 10th century the emperor [Nikephoros II Phokas](#) fortified the central part of the palace.²⁴ Fragments of these walls still survive. Because of the complexity of the Great Palace attempts to reconstruct its plan are highly speculative. In the last decade several legal and illegal excavations have uncovered extensive substructures in the area. Substantial ruins located today on the shore overlooking originally the port Boukoleon belong to the palace of Boukoleon.²⁵

3.3. The Blachernae palace

During the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118) the administrative center of [Constantinople](#) moved from the Great Palace to the [Blachernae palace](#), located in the northwest of the city and to the south of the famed homonymous church (of Blachernae).²⁶ The palace was built at ca. 500. Both Alexios I and Manuel I expanded it with the addition of great reception halls. This area was developed starting in the 5th century and it appears to have been popular with some aristocratic families.²⁷

One of the major works of Alexios I was the restoration and expansion of the Orphanotropheion of St. Peter in the Akropolis region, which included in addition to the orphanage a hospice for the blind and the elderly, as well as a school.

3.4. Peran (beyond Constantinople)

Another important development was the establishment of the Italian quarters along the Golden Horn.²⁸ Pisa, [Venice](#) and [Genoa](#) were granted exceptional trade concessions during the reign of the Komnenian dynasty, allowing them to create significant settlements. The Venetians were installed near Perama, and the Pisans and Genoese to the east of them.

4. The Late Byzantine City

The three fires that occurred in 1203, the siege and [sack of the city](#) by the crusaders in 1204, along with the systematic looting caused significant damage to the city. The ensuing intentional or involuntary neglect and natural calamities such as earthquakes that occurred during the [Latin occupation](#) (1204-1261), left Constantinople in a dilapidated state with a diminished population.²⁹

The city partly recovered under [Michael VIII](#) (1259-1282), who is credited with its [recapture](#).³⁰ He restored the land and sea walls, the ports, imperial palaces (especially the Blachernai palace), churches and monasteries, including Hagia Sophia, and charitable institutions. A huge column surmounted by a bronze statue of archangel Michael was placed in front of the church of the [Holy Apostles](#) in celebration of his recovery of the city.³¹ The so-called Tekfur Sarayı, a Palaiologan three-story palace in the northwest part of city whose shell still survives, might date from this period. Michael VIII conceded Galata, a cape on the northern side of the Golden Horn facing Constantinople, to the Genoese. The latter created a fortified settlement there. The so-called [Galata Tower](#) is the most significant remain of the Genoese fortification.³²

The recovery continued during the long reign of Michael VIII's son, Andronikos II (1282-1328), who also repaired the walls, houses, and public buildings. Numerous [churches](#) and monasteries (some of which still exist) were constructed or renovated by members of the imperial family or aristocratic patrons. Theodora Palaiologina, wife of Michael VIII, restored the [monastery of Lips](#); the [Chora monastery](#) was renovated by the statesman Theodore Metochites; the Pammakaristos monastery was taken under the care of Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotēs and his wife; the convent of Bebaias Elpidos was founded in the first half of the 14th century by Theodora Synadene, niece of Michael VIII. After the middle of the 14th century the city decayed rapidly and very little building activity was recorded.

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Glossary :

forum

The roman agora. Public market-place, open square or place of assembly for judicial and other public business in a Roman town or city.

horreum (apotheke)

1. horreum, ὀρεῖον, σιτοφυλάκειον (granary), ἀποθήκη: originally the term applied to a special place where fruits, harvest mainly, used to be garnered but later the depository place for every commodity was a horreum. During Late Antiquity the roman public horrea used to be structures where individuals deposited real assets and the state garnered harvest.

In the byzantine era the horrea (αποθήκη), administering by horrearius, used to be erected inside the imperial estates in order to secure the garnered produce.

2. From the late 7th c. onw, there existed state αποθήκη, administering by kommerziarioi, that served administrative units or locations of special commercial importance in the field of the traffic of goods. Those αποθήκη turned to become the royal commercia.

patrikios

(from lat. *patrius*) Higher title of honour, placed, according to the "Tactika" of the 9th and the 10th centuries, between *anthypatos* and *protospatharios*. It was given to the most important governors and generals. Gradually, however, it fell into disuse and from the 12th century did not exist any more.

praetorian prefect (praefectus praetorio)

Commander of the emperor's bodyguard under the principate. During the regne of Constantine I the praetorian prefect becomes a dignitary responsible for the administrative unit called the prefecture, which was subdivided into dioceses. In 400 A.D. there were four such praetorian prefectures, of Oriens, of Illyricum, of Italy and Africa and of Gallia. The praetorian prefect of Oriens was the mightiest among prefects. His office is for the last time mentioned in 680.