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Coexistence of Religious and Cultural Diversities

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Istanbul: A Meeting Point Of The Muslim World And The West

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Introduction

Hippodrome, the ancient town of Byzantium was inaugurated on May 11, 330 CE by Constantine as the new capital of the East Roman Empire, a Latin city with a Greek name, Constantinople, City of Constantine. In the efforts to cause the city to grow, Constantine built large mansions and by 380 CE, the population of the city grew to 100,000 to 150,000. By the middle of fourth century, Constantinople was almost a Christian city but Constantine allowed two temples to be built, one for the benefits of Hippodrome employees, and the other to pagans Tyche. As the ardent follower of Christianity, he built two great churches, the original Church of the Haghia Sophia and the Church of the Holy Apostles, and both sites became the major monumental foci for the Byzantine. Subsequent emperors after Constantine, especially Leo I (d. 474) continued to build important religious houses in Constantinople. The churches of SS Peter and Mark were built in 458 CE while the Monastery of St John was built in 463 CE. Another important church built during the reign of Emperor Leo I was the Church of the Virgin, which soon became a centre of pilgrimage for the Christians.
Constantinople (Old Istanbul) Under Byzantine Empire

The Greek word “Byzantine” is a rather literary term for an inhabitant of Constantinople, the usual word being konstantinou-polites. French scholars of the eighteenth century were the first to us “Byzantine” with reference to the empire rather than the city, and to speak of “Byzantine history.” The Byzantine Empire was, first of all, a state built around the Mediterranean Sea, and the core of the empire was heavily influenced by that fact. Throughout its history the Byzantine Empire focused on that central sea, and its communication, trade, industry, and cities were all determined largely by the characteristics of the Mediterranean.

The old name of Istanbul was Constantinople. The founding of Constantinople on the site of the Ancient Greek city of Byzantium (Byzantion), was as it has been described as one of the most important achievements of Constantine the Great. Constantine greatly improved the city and constituted it the equal of Rome in power. He transformed the city to be the imperial capital for all the inhabitants of the North, the South, the East, and the shores of Mediterranean, from the city on the Ister and from the Euphrates and the Ionian Gulf, to Cyrene and that part of Libya called Borium. Constantine constructed a council house called senate and ordered the same honors and official days as those customary to the other Romans. He deliberately wished to duplicate the features of ancient Rome, from the seven hills to the Roman forum called Forum of Maxentius, and a population that was exempt from taxation and supplied with lavish entertainment and free food. The official name of the city was Nea Roma (New Rome), although it was also called Constantinople, the city of Constantine.

Life in Constantinople began to be occupied with commerce and trade. Businesses grew foodstuffs such as meat and vegetables to luxury items such as rich fabrics and angle-length gowns. The Byzantine currency, the gold Byzant or solidus, have been described as the hardest currency in Europe and Middle East, accepted and respected from one end of Mediterranean to the other. The new capital made steady progress, while the importance of Rome diminished and its population gradually decreased. Within a century of her foundation Constantinople had more inhabitants and the sixth century the figure was well over half a million. It was New Rome that was destined to take the place of Old Rome and to supplant it as the new administrative centre of the Empire.

8 Ibid, p. 57.
9 Ibid. 58
10 Hearsey, John E.N. City of Constantine. 96.
Constantinople was to share in the privileges of Rome, and Constantine spanning in his attempt to build up the wealth and splendour of the new capital city with magnificent buildings and with the works of art scattered all parts of the empire. He was particularly lavish in building churches. He laid the foundations of many of the great buildings that were to grace the city with magnificent buildings and with the works of art scattered all parts of the empire. The cathedral of Hagia Sophia, a monumental church building and the church of the Holy Apostle, became the major monumental building of Byzantine, as well as the city of Constantinople. Thus, from the earliest times Constantinople was marked by Christianity as the Emperor was a devoted Christian. The early Christian institutions, and Christian sentiment become dominant. By the end of the fifth century when Emperor Theodosius II (d. 450 CE) founded a school known as the University of the Magnaura (commonly called University of Constantinople) in 425 CE. It cultivated all branches of secular learning known at that time. In 1045, newly set-up faculties of philosophy and law for the promotion of Greek learning, and the development of its strategic location between the east and the west, Constantinople was a much sought city. From the beginning of the fifth century, when Emperor Theodosius II extended the boundaries of Constantinople and built the splendid city. Constantinople became a great military stronghold, an impregnable fortress. Constantinople was always in danger from the Avars from South Russia and Persians. During the time of Emperor Heraclius (610-641 CE), he fought...