

İSTANBUL TECRÜBESİ / THE EXPERIENCE OF İSTANBUL

Dinsel ve Kültürel Farklılıkların Birarada yaşaması
Coexistence of Religious and Cultural Diversities

15 - 17 April 2010



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

Mohd. Shuhaimi Bin Haji Ishak^()*

Introduction

Hippodrome, the ancient town of Byzantium was inaugurated on May 11, 330 by Constantine as the new capital of the East Roman Empire, a Latin city with Greek name, Constantinople, City of Constantine.¹ In the efforts to cause the city grow, Constantine built large mansions and by 380 CE, the population of the city grew to 100,000 to 150,000.² By the middle of fourth century, Constantinople was still a Christian city but Constantine allowed two temples to be built, one for the Christians of Hippodrome employees, and the other to pagans Tyche.³ As the ardent follower of Christianity, he built two great churches, the original Church of the Hagia Sophia and the Church of the Holy Apostles, and both sites became the major monumental foci for the Byzantine.⁴ Subsequent emperors after Constantine, especially Leo I (d. 474) continued to build important religious houses in Constantinople. Churches of SS Peter and Mark were built in 458 CE while the Monastery of St. John the Theologian 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.⁵

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Hearsey, John E.N. *City of Constantine 324-1453*. London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd. 1963, 12.
Cetinkaya, Zeynep. *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 13.
¹ Ibid. 15.
² Ibid. 16.
Hearsey, John E.N. *City of Constantinople 324-1453*, pp. 42-48.

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 in the nineteenth century were the first to use "Byzantine" with reference to the empire rather than the city, and to speak of "Byzantine history."⁶ 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 was closely focused on that central sea, and its communication, trade, industry, and economy were all determined largely by the characteristics of the Mediterranean.⁷

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 turned out 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 considered 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 Danube to Euphrates and the Ionian Gulf, to Cyrene and that part of Libya called Borium.⁸ Constantine constructed a council house called senate and ordered the same honours as in the capital 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 Basilica 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.⁹

Life in Constantinople began to be occupied with commerce and trade. Businesses grew foodstuffs such as meat and vegetables to luxury items such as silks 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.¹⁰ The new capital grew steadily, while the importance of Rome diminished and its population steadily 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.¹¹

6 Browning, Robert. *The Byzantine Empire*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992, p. xiii.

7 Gregory, Timothy E. *A History of Byzantium*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 10.

8 Ibid, p. 57.

9 Ibid, 58.

10 Hearsey, John E.N. *City of Constantine*, 96.

11 Ostrogorsky, George. *History of the Byzantine State*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1956, 41.

Constantinople was to share in the privileges of Rome, and Constantine sparing in his attempt to build up the wealth and splendour of the new capital. He was particularly lavish in building churches. He laid the foundations of many of the great buildings that were to grace the city. The cathedral of Hagia Sophia, a monumental church building and the seat of the Church of the Holy Apostle, became the major monumental Byzantine, as well as the city of Constantinople.¹³ Thus, from the earliest times, Constantinople was marked by Christianity as the Emperor was a devoted Christian. Though he was in support of Christianity, Constantine continued to permit pagan practices, and even took part himself in some of these, particularly the cult of the sun god.¹⁴

The fourth century was indeed the period of change in Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire. There was not a sudden but a gradual change which was set in motion during the reign of Constantine. It was a period when the empire tilted across the centuries, from one dominated by paganism and pagan thought to one where Christian institutions, and Christian sentiment become dominant. By the end of the century, society in the Byzantine Empire had become largely Christian in orientation, though the majority of the population was perhaps not officially Christian.¹⁵ Constantinople later became an important centre for learning and education when Theodosius II (d. 450 CE) founded a school known as the University of the Palace of Magnaura (commonly called University of Constantinople) in 425 CE. The university cultivated all branches of secular learning known at that time.¹⁶ In 1045, the university set-up faculties of philosophy and law for the promotion of Greek literature and Roman law, both of which were indebted to Byzantium for their preservation and development.¹⁷

Because 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 walls – extant to this day – running from the shores of Marmara to the tip of the Bosphorus, Constantinople became a great military stronghold, an impregnable fortress. Constantinople was always in danger from the Avars from South Russia and the Persians. During the time of Emperor Heraclius (610-641 CE), he fought

Zeynep. *The Remaking of Istanbul*, 16.

Georgy, George. 47.

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Charles. *Byzantium: Greatness and Decline*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957, 96-



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