



Summary :

The Muslim presence in Constantinople was a fact over long periods of the Byzantine phase of the city, and it has been attested already since the emergence of the Islamic religion and until the fall of the city in 1453. However, the rarity and the scantiness of the historical evidence do not allow an overall approach of the matter but only general estimations.

Date

9th-15th c.

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Introduction

Muslim presence in Constantinople probably go back to the first period of the spread of Islam during the 7th century; it would mostly have to do with the presence of Arab merchants converted to the new religion, who continued the pre-Islamic tradition of Arab commercial activity in the area. Constantinople's function as a [commercial capital](#) of the whole Mediterranean and the countries of the wider region already from the early Byzantine period, led to a constant presence of merchants of various nationalities, including many oriental people. In addition to these, another kind of foreigners often present in Constantinople were the delegates of the rulers of other states.

2. The Arabic presence in Constantinople: the Muslim mosque

At some later point the Muslims were regarded as a quasi-community and appropriate institutions emerged, probably in the context of some treaties that had temporarily suspended the constant confrontation between the armies of the Byzantine Empire and the Caliphate. Among the provisions for the comfort of the Muslims in the Byzantine capital, the foundation and operation of a mosque for the practicing of the Muslims seems to be most characteristic. The earliest information on the existence of a mosque dates to the early 10th century and can be collected from letters of patriarch Nikolas Mystikos to the Abbasid [caliph](#) of Baghdad, which date more precisely in the period of the patriarch's regency, after the death of the emperor Alexandros (913) until the enthronement of [Romanos I Lekapenos](#) (920). This correspondence, where the mention to the mosque of Constantinople is to be found, took place on the occasion of the closure of Christian churches within the Abbasid territory, which we are informed that was due to rumours circulating in the [Abbasid](#) capital, concerning the alleged closure of the mosque in Constantinople. The patriarch denied these rumours, and at the same time he protested for the closure of the Christian churches.¹ The date of the composition of these letters constitutes a *terminus ante quem* for the foundation of the mosque of Constantinople, which however cannot be determined more precisely. But, since it is mentioned that the mosque was intended for the practice of Islam by Muslim captives, who had been transported to the Byzantine capital, it is probable that it was precisely on the opportunity of their presence there that the mosque had been founded; and this must have taken place not long before the date of the correspondence between the patriarch and the caliph.

Naturally, apart from the need that the mosque was founded to fulfill and its relation to the presence of captives in Constantinople, which was just a conjecture, the mosque would be associated in the future to a more general and long-term Muslim presence in the city, which was mainly related to the arrival and settlement of Muslim merchants in the city. But there were also political implications, rather the aspirations of Byzantine diplomacy that were manifested through the operation of the mosque, since the Byzantine authorities would be the ones to decide which leader of the Muslim forces would be commemorated in the prayer of Friday; naturally, this was usually the sovereign of the power whose relations with the Empire were of high priority for Byzantium. On the other hand, the commemoration in the mosque of Constantinople was a source of prestige for the Muslim sovereign as well, since it was perceived as a recognition of his state as a leading power in the Islamic world. For example, while the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad was commemorated up to the beginning of 11th century, from 1027 onward the name of the Fatimid caliph of Cairo was



commemorated instead, and from the mid-eleventh century on that of [Seljuk sultan](#).²

3. Turkish presence in Constantinople

The presence of Muslim merchants in Constantinople was continuous at the city's heyday, from the 9th century (if not earlier) up to the 12th century. Whether the presence of Muslim merchants was accompanied by a permanent installation of some of them (as it happened with the [Venetians](#) and the [Genoese](#)) is uncertain, but even their transitory presence was continuous and regularly renewed. Moreover, apart from the Arab merchants, by the 11th century the Muslim presence of Constantinople also comprised the Turkish element. A poem in the vernacular by John Tzetis (mid-12th century) is indicative regarding this element, since it mentions that a great number of languages spoken in the markets of Constantinople, including the Arabic and the Turkish.³

The serious crisis and decline of the city after the [fall of 1204](#) and under [Latin rule](#), characterised by demographic decrease and the serious debasement of the economic and commercial importance of city, must have had its effect on the Muslim presence; in any case, its continuance through the period of the Latin rule, perhaps even in the period of first [Palaiologoi](#), is doubtful.⁴ Gradually, however, the Muslim presence must have resumed, though this time its main element would be the Turkic. The Turkish expansion from the mid-14th century onward had resulted in the expansion of the Ottoman territory at the immediate precincts of city. The proximity with Turkish populations facilitated its access for the Muslims to an almost daily basis. The Turkish presence in [Constantinople](#) in the late 14th- and during the 15th century until the [Ottoman conquest](#), can be distinguished in two categories: the Turks that were permanently living in the city, literally forming a community, and those who went there temporarily from the nearby Ottoman territory, in order to arrange their affairs, usually within few hours. The presence of the first category is implied by the demand of Sultan Bayiazid to appoint a Turkish judge in the city, who would attend to the judicial affairs of Turkish residents (a form of immunity); the second category is implied in the description of the defensive measures taken by the Byzantines before the siege of 1453, when they sealed the gates of the walls and arrested any Turks who were caught inside the city.⁵

1. Jenkins, R.J.H.- Westerink, L.G. (eds.), *Nicholas I. Letters* (Washington DC 1973), no. 102.

2. Ζακουθηνός, Δ.Α., *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία, 324-1071* (Athens 1972), pp. 386, 488.

3. Cited by Mango, C., *Βυζάντιο. Η Αυτοκρατορία της Νέας Ρώμης* (Athens 21990), p. 105.

4. Matschke K.P., "The late Byzantine urban economy, Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries", Laiou, A. (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, Washington, D.C. 2002, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* 39, p. 479

5. Bekker, I. (ed.), *Michaelis Ducae Nepotis Historia Byzantina* (Bonn 1834), XIII p. 49, XV p. 56 and XXXIV pp. 244-245.

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	Canard M. , "Les expéditions des Arabes contre Constantinople dans l'histoire et dans la légende", <i>Journal Asiatique</i> , 208, 1926, 61-121

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	Islamic Spaces and Diplomacy in Constantinople http://art.unc.edu/ccm/groups/public/@art/@faculty/documents/content/ccm1_032298.pdf
	The Muslim Presence in Constantinople, 9th-15th Centuries: Some preliminary observations http://books.google.gr/books?id=ohFJD_QT3E8C&printsec=frontcover&dq=Studies+on+the+internal+diaspora#PPA125,M1

Glossary :

	Abbasids
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The most long-lived and maybe the most important Arabic dynasty. They overthrew the Ommeyyads of Syria and reigned with Bagdad as their capital, from 750 to 1258.

 **caliph**

The supreme religious and political authority of Muslims, considered successor of Muhammad (Arabic: khalifa = deputy). He was the head of the Caliphate, the religious state of the Arabs.

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Quotations

The existence of at least one mosque in Constantinople attested in the 10th c.:

a. Άκουε οὖν, τοῦ Σαρακηνῶν γένους ὁ μέγας καὶ ὑπερκείμενος ἄνθρωπος. Ῥωμαίων οἱ ἐξ ἀρχῆς βασιλεύσαντες οὕτω τὰ περὶ τῶν αἰχμαλώτων διέταξαν, ὡς εἰδότες ὅτι μέχρι μὲν τῆς τοῦ πολέμου συστάσεως δεῖ πρὸς κάκωσιν τῶν πολεμίων ἀγωνίζεσθαι, ἐπειδὴν δὲ λάβωσιν ὑπὸ χεῖρα τοὺς πολεμοῦντας, ὡς ὑπεξουσίῳ κήδεσθαι καὶ πρόνοιαν ἐπιδείκνυσθαι τῆς αὐτῶν ἀταλαιπώρου ζωῆς, καὶ ὥστε μηδὲν αὐτοῖς ἕτερον ἐπιτρέχειν ἢ μόνην τὴν ἀποστέρησιν τῆς πατρίδος καὶ τῶν οἰκείων καὶ φίλων καὶ συγγενῶν. Διὰ τοῦτο καὶ οἰκήσεις ἀπένειμαν ἀστενοχωρήτους καὶ ἀέρος καθαρωτάτου ἀπόλαυσιν, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα πρὸς τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ζωὴν συντελεῖ οἷα τοῖς ὁμογενέσιν καὶ ὁμοπίστοις, καὶ τοῖς τῆς ὑμετέρας θρησκείας ἀφωρισμένον εὐκτήριον.

Jenkins, R.J.H. - L.G. Westerink (ed.), *Nicholas I. Letters* (CFHB 6, Washington DC 1973), no. 102.57-67.

b. Ἐκγονος δὲ τοῦ Μαυρίου ὑπῆρχεν ὁ Μάσαλμας, ὁ κατὰ Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ἐκστρατεύσας, οὐτινος καὶ δι' αἰτήσεως ἐκτίσθη τὸ τῶν Σαρακηνῶν μαγίσδιον ἐν τῷ βασιλικῷ πραιτωρίῳ.

Moravcsik, G. - Jenkins, R.J.H. (ed.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio* 1 (CFHB 1.1, Washington DC 1967), p. 93.

The presence of Sejuk merchants in Constantinople during the 12th c.:

τοῖνον ἐπιπράττει φυλακαῖς ἐνειροθῆναι καὶ τὰ ὄντα πάντα ἀφαιρεθῆναι ὅποσοι Ῥωμαῖοι τε καὶ Τοῦρκοι παραγματευταὶ τοῦ Ἰκονίου ἀπάραντες τὸ Βυζάντιον ἐπεισήσαν.

van Dieten, J.A. (ed.), *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* (CFHB 11, Berlin – New York 1975), p. 494.

Constantinople viewed by the Arabs, early 10th c.:

When reading Arabic-Islamic medieval literature, it is impossible to avoid noticing the special mystique that Constantinople held for the Arab Muslims. The authors were practically unanimous in declaring that no other place in the world was comparable in size, in geographical location, and in importance. The third/ninth and fourth/tenth-century geographical manuals determined later perceptions of the Byzantine capital, since works from this period became points of reference for subsequent Arabic-Islamic writings on the city. In writing about Constantinople, Arab Muslims were not only reacting to the city's physical presence; they were also



responding to its literary and historical associations.

[...]

Perhaps the most extensive and informative description of the city by an Arab was made by Harun b. Yahya and inserted in the early fourth-/tenth-century geographical work of Ibn Rusteh, *Kitab al-a'laq al-nafisa*. The date of the arrival of Harun to Constantinople is uncertain, but he is believed to have been there sometime during the late third/ninth to early fourth-/tenth century. Although a captive, Harun was left to wander in Constantinople contemplating the buildings, monuments and churches, examining the exterior of the Imperial Palace and some of its halls, analyzing statues and talismans with great interest, and witnessing or even taking part in imperial ceremonies... As a result, Harun's descriptions constitute a primary text for assessing the symbolic importance that Constantinople attained in medieval Arab Muslim literature.

El Cheikc, N.M., *Byzantium viewed by the Arabs* (London 2004), pp. 140, 142-3.