



## Summary :

Constantinople was founded by Constantine I in 324, on the location of Byzantium, the ancient colony of Megara. As the capital of the Byzantine Empire until 1453, the city became the symbol of Byzantine identity and survival. Primary sources provide written evidence on how and to what extent Byzantine authors wrote descriptions of Constantinople and were interested in detailed accounts of the city. Presenting the main sources in a chronological as well as in a thematic way emphasizes the diversity of the sources that represent the three basic periods of Byzantine history.

## 1. Introduction

Constantinople was founded in 324 by [Constantine I](#), on the location of the ancient colony of Megara, Byzantium. The [dedication of the city was celebrated in 330](#). The transfer of the capital from Rome to Constantinople, combined with the gradual shift of political power from West to East marks the beginning of the Byzantine Empire. Constantinople remained the capital until its final [fall](#) to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, representing the symbol of [Byzantine identity](#) and survival.

Constantinople has been the subject of extensive historical and archaeological research, with the focus shifting from its geographical, political and [economic importance](#) to the city's administrative organisation, its [population](#), and [everyday life](#). Finally, several studies focus on the subject of the [topography](#) of the city and its evolution during the entire Byzantine millenium.

Primary sources provide written evidence on how and to what extent Byzantine authors wrote detailed descriptions of their capital. In order to understand this evidence better, two important points need to be made in advance:

First, there is no systematic and detailed description of Constantinople, written by a Byzantine author, with the exception of the [Patria](#) and the *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*. Most sources focus on specific aspects of the city's life and organisation, instead of the overall picture, or give information scattered within the narrative.

Second, it is apparent that, from the 7th century onwards, the majority of Byzantine literature is produced in Constantinople by natives and is meant to be read in the capital. Therefore, the texts dealing exclusively with descriptions of Constantinople are very few, while historiographical texts provide even more fragmented information.<sup>1</sup>

This entry aims to emphasize the diversity in the sources, representing the three basic periods of Byzantine history, and to show how Constantinople is viewed by Byzantine writers. Therefore, the presentation of the main sources is done in a chronological as well as in a thematic way.

## 2. Early Byzantine period (324-610)

The earliest description of Constantinople can be found in a fifteen-page Latin text, entitled *Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae*, dating around 425, during the reign of the Emperor Theodosios II (408-450).<sup>2</sup> It includes precise and detailed descriptions of the city, including the location of certain churches and of the several quarters, as well as information on the security and patrol system. It also presents the expansion and evolution of the city during the [Theodosian dynasty](#) (379-450).<sup>3</sup>

Almost all the historians and chronographers of the Early Byzantine period include information on the Byzantine capital, others on a smaller and others on a larger scale. Zosimos, the last [pagan](#) historian of this period, covers the time of [Augustus](#) until 410. He discusses the choice of the ancient city of Byzantium as the new capital and is an important source of information on [Constantinople during the reign of Constantine I](#). In addition, the first Christian historians provide information on the symbolic aspect of the choice of Constantinople, as well as descriptions of its founding and dedication. They are [Philostorgios](#), Sokrates Scholastikos and Sozomen, who wrote "ecclesiastical" histories, in the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century.<sup>4</sup>



The works of Prokopios, one of the most prominent writers in Byzantine historiography, take up the majority of the 6th century, as far as the [descriptions of the capital](#) are concerned. His work, *De Aedificiis (Buildings)* is an encomium of [Justinian's](#) building activity, and is the first work that describes the monuments of the city and its environs, constructed or restored by Justinian. In Prokopios' two other works (*Wars* and *Secret History*) there is also information of important events taking place in Constantinople, as well as life in the imperial court.<sup>5</sup>

The works of [Agathias](#), Theophylact of Simocatta and the *Chronikon Paschale* also offer fragmented information on the [buildings](#) and [fortifications](#) in the city, and on the evolution of its topography. Also important are the mentions of events in the city, like the revolts of the [demoi](#) and other episodes concerning natural disasters, life in the capital and the emperors' political choices. [John Malalas](#), in his [Chronography](#), dedicates his entire last book to the presentation of Justinian's reign. He looks into events in the Byzantine capital, such as dedications of churches, natural phenomena, revolts, and includes a great number of information on Constantinopolitan buildings and monuments, with references of the emperor who founded them. He also presents the mythological versions of Constantinople's history.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Middle Byzantine period

In the Middle Byzantine period, especially in the 10th century, a large – compared to the other periods – number of texts exists which are in essence an overview of Constantinople, examining different aspects of the city's life.

#### 3.1. Patria of Constantinople

The title *Patria* signifies texts, which were included in a 10th-century collection and concern the monuments of Constantinople.<sup>7</sup> Th. Preger, at the beginning of the 20th century, published a collective volume, which includes:

1) The texts of the 10th-century collection, unconnected to each other, date in periods prior to the 10th century. These are: i) *Patria* of Constantinople by [Hesychios of Miletus](#), dated in the 6th century. ii) *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* by an anonymous author. It is a text discussing several monuments of the city and the miracles connected with them, while it is also greatly concerned with statues. iii) *Narration on the edification of Hagia Sophia*. It is dated between the 7th and 10th centuries.

2) A collection of texts, dated in the 10th century (around 990) and falsely attributed to George Kodinos. The main one consists of the extended version of Hesychios' work.<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.2. The Book of the Eparch

The [Book of the Eparch](#), among the most valuable sources for Byzantium's economic and administrative history, contains the rules and laws defining the life and activities of the [guilds](#) of merchants and traders in Constantinople. It was compiled under the supervision of emperor Leo VI the Wise in 912.<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.3. The Typikon of the Great Church - the Synaxarion of Constantinople

The *Typikon* includes the instructions and rules concerning the time of the church's services. The codex *H* consists of the *Typikon of the Great Church* and of a version of the *Synaxarion*, composed in 950-959.<sup>10</sup> These two texts depict the monuments and temples, which were part of the procession and rite in important celebrations of the church. They also commemorate saints, pious emperors and patriarchs, connecting them to Constantinople's history, and the destructions that had befallen the city in the past due to [fires](#), [earthquakes](#), enemy attacks etc.<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.4. Hagiology

Saints' Lives often include information on the capital, especially three Lives from the 10th century. These are the Lives of the



patriarchs Ignatios and [Euthymios](#) and the Life of St Basil the Young. These texts rarely refer to secular buildings of the city, with the exception of the [palace](#), clearly favouring churches and [monasteries](#), connected with these three men. Building activities become detailed mostly when connected with the narrative flow of the life of the described person. Constantinople becomes more of a symbol in these texts: its environs are closer to the natural space of the saint, the area between the two walls is a "mixed place", while the traditional centre of the city is the centre of political action.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.5. De Cerimoniis aulae byzantinae

The work *De Cerimoniis aulae byzantinae* is a collection of decrees, regulations and rites from the 5th to the 10th century, concerning the imperial court ceremonial. It is dated in the first half of the 10th century, a period when many texts started to be organised in compilations; this practice began around the end of the 9th and reached its peak in the first half of the 10th century.<sup>13</sup> This work also presents historical events, diplomatic activity, and prosopographical and topographical information on Constantinople. It is also an important source concerning churches, houses, buildings and especially the complex of the [Great Palace](#).

### 3.6. Historiography and Chronography

The historiographical tradition of the middle period contains a large number of works, whose main theme revolves around Constantinople and the life of the emperor. This includes narratives such as the [Chronographia](#) of Theophanes [the Confessor](#), the main sources for the so-called "Dark Ages" (7th-8th centuries), but also the later works of Theophanes Continuatus, Michael Attaleiates, Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Bryennios. Among the chronicles of this period are also the works of [Michael Psellos](#), John Skylitzes and his Continuator, George Kedrenos, John Zonaras, Constantine Manasses and Manuel Glykas. These accounts discuss aspects of the political and economic history of Constantinople, and everyday life. They also include topographical descriptions of the city and its evolution. This is particularly evident in the 11th- and 12th-century works, which depict [Constantinople](#) at the time of the [Komnenian dynasty](#). The [Alexiad by Anna Komnene](#) is a characteristic example of this evolution of the city, since she presents the building activity of Alexios I, with particular emphasis on the transfer of the political centre from the Great Palace to the [Palace of Blachernai](#). Attaleiates, Skylitzes and Nikephoros Vryennios also stress the importance of the northwest region of the city, and they describe the transformation of the area around [Blachernai](#).

## 4. Late Byzantine period (1204-1453)

### 4.1. Historiography

The *Chronike Diegesis* by [Niketas Choniates](#) stands on the verge of the two periods and covers the time span from the death of Alexios I to 1206. One of the most essential sources for the siege and [capture](#) of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204, this narrative also includes a small text, written by Choniates, with the conventional title *De signis*. It contains descriptions of the main statues of Constantinople, which were destroyed by the Latins.<sup>14</sup>

The 13th- and 14th-century historians ([George Pachymeres](#), John Kantakouzenos, [Nikephoros Gregoras](#)) mainly offer fragmented information on the city itself. Even though their personal activities revolved around Constantinople, the central government and the palace, they do not describe the city. Their information focuses on the spatial organisation of the palace and its environs, the churches that were in use at the time and on ceremonies and rites that had survived to the late period; this information can lead to some first thoughts on the evolution of [Constantinople](#) during the last centuries of its history as a capital city.

Finally, the works of the 15th-century historians, who depicted the events of the siege and capture of the city by the Ottomans in 1453, are of some interest. Doukas and [Kritoboulos](#) in particular, who offer the most detailed narratives, contain information on the walls of the city and the organisation of the [defensive system](#) of Constantinople.

### 4.2. Pseudo-Kodinos



An anonymous work of the end of the 14th century is usually attributed to Pseudo-Kodinos; it is the only text after the *De Cerimoniis* which deals with the detailed portrayal of the rules and decrees of court ceremonial. Its significance for the study of Late Byzantine Constantinople is also great, since it discusses the city's topography and architecture and provides details on the different areas of the ceremonies involving the emperor and his life, in particular on the palace of Blachernai and its evolution in the 14th century.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Official documents

Imperial letters, treaties, agreements and mainly **chrysobulls** can be categorised as official documents. These can shed light on the subject of Constantinople, especially when they concern the Italians in Constantinople, who were given the right to establish their own quarters within the city. As characteristic examples we can mention Alexios I's documents, which provide privileges to [Venice](#), Pisa and [Genoa](#).<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Rhetorical texts

Among the numerous surviving works of Byzantine rhetoric, there are some which place Constantinople or specific locations within it in the centre of their narration. These are presented here in categories regardless of the chronological period to which they belong.

### 6.1. Monodies

*Monodies* are lamenting speeches, describing natural disasters, such as earthquakes and fires. An inspiring topic for three such works appeared to be the collapse of the **dome** of [Hagia Sophia](#). The reactions caused by this event were first depicted in a 6th-century *monodia* written by an anonymous author;<sup>17</sup> this work has also been dated to the middle of the 14th century.<sup>18</sup> Alexios Makremvolites also composed a *monodia* with the same topic, inspired by the collapse of the church in 1346, while Michael Psellos does not appear to have been inspired by an actual event when he created his work with the same subject. Isidore, metropolitan of Kiev, depicted the destruction of the [Blachernai church](#) from fire in 1434, carefully describing the interior of the church. Finally, a great number of *monodies* and laments, some written in the vernacular, are devoted to the fall of the City in 1453.<sup>19</sup>

### 6.2. Encomia and Ekphraseis

An *encomion* is the "portrayal of good characteristics" and commonly refers to specific people or different types of people, animals, plants etc.;<sup>20</sup> there is also a large number of *encomia* referring to the emperor. However, there are also *encomia* dedicated to Constantinople, such as the work of Himerios (4th century), who connects the praise of the capital with that of the emperor Julian (361-363).<sup>21</sup> [Theodore Metochites](#) also composed an *encomium* of Constantinople, entitled *Vyzantios e peri vasilidos megalou poleos*.<sup>22</sup>

The *ekphrasis*, while similar to the *encomion* as a literary genre, can be described as "a precise description which clearly places the subject before us",<sup>23</sup> and usually refers to people, objects, places, specific times etc. or, in the case of Constantinople, to churches and their iconographical programme. Paul the Silentiary delivered an *ekphrasis* on Hagia Sophia in 562.<sup>24</sup> Constantine Rhodios composed a poem focusing on the architecture of the [church of the Holy Apostles](#), while Nicholas Mesarites, in his *ekphrasis* for the same temple, provides a detailed description of the now lost mosaics of the church. Other *ekphraseis* can be found in the work of patriarch Photios as well as the speeches of emperor Leo VI.<sup>25</sup> Constantine Manasses depicted a mosaic of the imperial palace, which also inspired Manuel Philes to compose a poem, while Makarios Makres in the 14th century described a fresco from Nea Peribleptos, a church in the monastery of Charsianitou in Constantinople.

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## Glossary :

	<b>chrysobull</b> (gold seal) Imperial document of the Byzantine state which was so named because it bore the gold seal of the emperor.
	<b>dome</b> A characteristic element of Byzantine architecture. The dome is a hemispherical vault on a circular wall (drum) usually pierced by windows. The domed church emerges in the Early Byzantine years and its various types gradually prevail, while they are expanded in the Balkans and in Russia.
	<b>gentile</b> The term was used in the first centuries after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, to distinguish between Christians and subjects of an ancient Greek religious and cultural background.