



Summary :

Constantinople was a center of local, regional and interregional commerce, dominating the domestic and foreign trade of the Byzantine state for the better part of the latter's existence. However, from the 13th century control of the Byzantine capital's commercial activity progressively passed into the hands of Western merchants, particularly Italians.

Date

4th - 15th centuries

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. The scope of commercial activity in Constantinople: terminology

Constantinople was a center of local, regional and interregional trade, a fact which to a great degree was due to the city's geographic location and close relationship with the sea. However, in order the scope of commercial activities centered on the Byzantine capital to become more comprehensible, a quick investigation of terminology beforehand is essential. Having adapted Luuk de Lig's criteria for the categorization of trade fairs in the Roman world based on duration, geographic scope, volume of goods exchanged and dominant type of exchanges, Angeliki Laiou presents three categories of trade: i) local trade, involving direct exchange between producers and consumers and covering distances up to 50 km or less, ii) regional trade, which is carried out over larger areas and is related to the exchange of goods produced and consumed in those areas, and iii) interregional trade, essentially identified with entrepôt trade, conducted in areas more than 300 km away and dealing with the trading of luxury items.¹

2. Commercial activity in Constantinople: 4th-6th centuries

The 6th century marked the completion of an evolution that had been set into motion with the [foundation of Constantinople](#) – to the detriment of Rome – since the [new capital](#) had by then become the empire's main commercial hub. Undeniably, the Mediterranean was a Byzantine lake and Byzantine trade to the west reached as far as England and to the east as far as India (by way of the Red Sea) or Central Asia by land.²

The total amount of wheat, oil and wine required for provisioning Constantinople had to be imported from other areas.³ For wheat, in particular, the Byzantine capital depended on the annual production of Egypt, which was the main source of supply for Constantinople, through the institution of the civic [annona](#).⁴ Each year, a large fleet of ships loaded with grain sailed from Egypt destined for Constantinople, a journey that had to be repeated two or three times.⁵ For the process of receiving, unloading,⁶ storing and transporting this grain supply, a process which would then end with the daily distribution of bread to the city,⁷ the efficient functioning of an enormous infrastructure was necessary, an important precondition for the smooth social life of a city which around the year 600 is estimated to have numbered 300,000-500,000 inhabitants.⁸ Imported grain, oil and wine were supplemented by other foodstuffs, such as fish and meat, which could be procured from the city's specialized markets.⁹

Generally speaking, regional and interregional maritime trade benefited from the existence of infrastructures. In Constantinople, in the 4th and 5th centuries, the construction of the harbor of Julian on the Sea of [Marmara](#) and, later on, that of [Theodosius](#), along with the granaries, led to the increase in the capacity of the two natural [ports](#) of the Golden Horn. Thus the capital boasted a total of almost 4 km of landing docks, which could serve the simultaneous mooring of 500 medium-sized ships.¹⁰ The importance attained by [Constantinople](#) during that period as a commercial entrepôt is also implied by [Justinian I's](#) (527-565) foundation of two new customs houses (*dekateuteria*), attached to the customs house of Constantinople, in [Abydos](#) and the Hieron, at the entrance of the [Hellespont](#) and the [Bosporus](#) respectively, to collect taxes from ships sailing from and to the Mediterranean.¹¹



3. 7th-8th centuries

In the 7th century, the Avaro-Slav raids in the Balkans since the end of the 6th century on the one hand and the Arab conquest of Syria, Palestine, Egypt (areas which at the beginning of the 7th century had been temporarily under Persian control) and North Africa on the other, as well as continuous Arab raids in Asia Minor, caused enormous difficulties to the Byzantine state not only in the military and political field, but also in that of economy. Communication by land between Constantinople and Thessalonica, Thessaly, Hellas and the Peloponnese had essentially been severed until the beginning of the 9th century, due to Avaro-Slav raids and the settlement of Slavs in the Balkans. Although communication by sea had not been interrupted, navigation suffered from [piracy](#) (particularly after the conquest of Crete by the Arabs in 827).¹²

The loss of Egypt caused great difficulties to the capital's grain supply. Little is known as to how this problem was dealt with: the areas that provided the capital with wheat were the hinterland of Thessalonica, the [west coast](#) of the [Black Sea](#), the Thracian hinterland, [Bithynia](#), and perhaps also [Ephesos](#). Nevertheless, although there is some evidence that grain ships were coming into the capital, there is no information on how this grain reached Constantinople, nor on the individuals that transported it there, although it is considered unlikely that the provisioning in grain in this period should have been left entirely to free trade.¹³

Given the limited scope of commercial exchanges at this time, it is thought that at least local trade (particularly in foodstuffs) existed, which must have been important in the wider area of Constantinople. Perhaps regional trade also existed between Constantinople and Bithynia, and probably the Bulgarian coast as well.¹⁴ Apart from grain and the trade of foodstuffs in general, silk fabrics constituted an important item of exchange, as well as slaves. More specifically, trade in slaves was conducted by the state, as well as – most probably – by private individuals.¹⁵ Apart from domestic trade, foreign trade also continued to exist, although clearly carried out in a more limited scale. The testimony that during the first half of the 7th century [Jewish merchants](#) from the Byzantine Empire travelled between Constantinople, Carthage, Spain and Gaul is indicative.¹⁶

4. 9th-10th centuries

On a military-political level, the 9th and 10th centuries are characterized by the revival of the empire, which starts to take the offensive on all fronts. The political revival kept pace with a flourishing economy, as the recapture or acquisition of large areas increased state revenues and the scope of exchange as well, since some territories specialized in certain products.¹⁷

Constantinople was under a special status at least up to the 11th century with a controlled economy and trades organized into [guilds](#), which were run by strict regulations and controlled by the state.¹⁸ Thus, during this period the Byzantine government exercises strict control over commerce. An indicative example is the trade in high-quality silk, the most distinctive and well-known case of a controlled product (*kekolymenton*), whose export outside Byzantine frontiers was forbidden, while production of best-quality purple silk was allowed only at the imperial workshops.¹⁹ Wheat, salt, olive oil, wine, as well as iron and gold were also forbidden items (*kekolymenta*). From the 9th until the late 12th century the Byzantine capital was a most important entrepôt of the eastern luxury trade, as well as other cities that functioned as centers of interregional and international trade. However, the activities of foreign merchants in Constantinople, their place of residence and their contacts with Constantinopolitan merchants, as well as the importation of merchandise into the capital, but also the travel of certain categories of merchants – e.g. the raw silk merchants – outside the city to buy the merchandise were under strict control.²⁰ The posts of entry of merchandise were also controlled, as were, to some extent, the commodities to be exported: the prohibition of exporting *kekolymenta* has already been mentioned. Indeed, Leo VI (886-912) forbade trade with Egypt and Syria. Byzantine merchants, however, never stopped trading with the enemy, except in times of crisis. The controlled foreign trade of Constantinople – more, of course, in theory and in the intent of the state than in reality – was regulated by treaties, such as those with the Rus' or with the Arabs.²¹

Regarding domestic trade, Constantinople possessed permanent markets, where retail trade was being conducted, e.g. the bakery



shops and the grocery stores that one could find all over the city and where the inhabitants purchased all necessary products. Bulk sales took place on specific dates and in specified markets, so that government regulations could be enforced more strictly, while trading in cattle and fish was carried out at particular places.²² At the market of Constantinople were exchanged, among others, wine, olive oil, meat, salt fish, salt, candle wax, timber, ceramics, linen and woolen cloth etc. Slave trade continued to exist well into the 11th century, while luxury items such as perfumes, spice and silk held pride of place in exchanges.²³

To sum up, during this period local trade was bringing into Constantinople for the most part alimentary products from Thrace and Asia Minor. Regional trade imported products from a wide area, encompassing Bulgaria and the west coast of the Black Sea, regions from where Bulgarian and Russian merchants brought candle wax, honey, furs and linen into the capital and exported luxury items. Finally, interregional trade included the entire empire as well as international trade, e.g. the linen cloth of the Pontos and the pork from [Paphlagonia](#), but also the spices which came to the capital from Syria through [Trebizond](#).²⁴

5. 11th-12th centuries

In the 11th and 12th centuries the Byzantine is showing prosperity, a fact also reflected in trade. As regards domestic commerce, its growth is related to the increase of demand from the cities and the countryside for all kinds of goods, to the increase of the number of available coin, as well as to the development of agriculture. The extremely important issue of provisioning the cities does not seem to face problems during this period. [Constantinople](#), in particular, receives goods from the provinces (e.g. grain, cheese, wine, meat) in abundant quantities, being provisioned both from its hinterland and the Black Sea region, as well as from the southern part of the Balkans.²⁵

Foreign trade included a great part of the kind of merchandise that was exchanged in the past (among others, silk and foodstuffs were exported, while spices, perfumes and precious timber were imported), but during this period new trends appeared. The most significant relates to the “Commercial Revolution” that took place in the 11th century in Western Europe, a sustained quickening in the relations of exchange, which was evident mainly in the Italian maritime cities, but which would eventually include all of Europe. At the forefront of this development were the Italian maritime cities of [Amalfi](#), Venice, Genoa, and Pisa. Particularly from the 12th century, all Italian maritime cities had an interest in the trade of the eastern Mediterranean, which became part of a world of exchange that, for the first time since the 6th century, included Italy and, by the late Middle Ages, the entire Mediterranean.²⁶ Consequently, the study of Byzantine trade from this period onwards owes must be done in conjunction with Italian merchant economy.

In 1082, emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118), under pressure from the Norman invasion, signed a treaty with Venice, granting many commercial privileges, which were ratified and extended by his successors. Later on, Pisa (1111) and Genoa (1155) were granted privileges, which were also renewed.²⁷ The nature of these privileges meant, inter alia, reducing – or, in the case of Venice, abolishing – the entry duty on ships entering and leaving Constantinople, while eventually the transactions tax between Byzantine and Italian merchants was also abolished.²⁸ These concessions gradually brought Byzantine merchants at a disadvantage as opposed to the Italians and strengthened the financial position of the latter (mainly the Venetians) in the eastern Mediterranean.

Constantinople remained an important center of local, regional and interregional trade.²⁹ However, the city’s particularity as a closed and protected market, as well as elements of its special status, such as the stay of foreigner merchants for limited periods of time in special buildings, their paying an entry tax and regulation of their exports, were eroded by the granting of privileges to Italians merchants.³⁰ Each of the three largest Italian maritime cities ([Venice](#), [Genoa](#), and [Pisa](#)) now had its own quarter in Constantinople,³¹ while conflicts among themselves and with the Byzantines were not infrequent.

6. 13th-15th centuries

In [1204](#), the armies of the Fourth Crusade conquered Constantinople and with the West’s military penetration into Byzantium the previous economic activity took on a new form. Occupied Byzantine territories were partitioned among the crusaders, while Venice received the lion’s share, controlling the most important ports and therefore commerce. Specifically, in Constantinople Venice



received three eighths of the city and thousands of Venetians settled there; the result was that the city became the most important Venetian commercial center during the [period of Frankish rule](#).³² One of the consequences of the fall of Constantinople in 1204 was that Italian merchants no longer resided temporarily in special commercial stations in the cities, but began to settle permanently in them, leading to the colonization of entire Byzantine regions. In [1261](#), the army of the [emperor of Nicaea](#) (the most significant Greek successor state of the Byzantine Empire) [Michael VIII Palaiologos \(1259-1282\)](#) recaptured Constantinople. This event forced the Venetians to abandon those parts of the capital they possessed and to lose their privileged commercial position. Nevertheless, they developed other bases, and from 1267 they recovered, after further renegotiations with the Byzantines, the region in Constantinople where they had settled in the past. On the other hand, in 1261 Michael VIII granted to the Genoese by the [treaty of Nymphaion](#), in return for assistance – which turned out to be unnecessary – to be offered by their fleet against the Venetians in the imminent occupation of Constantinople, a large number of tax exemptions and commercial bases. It turned out, however, that the Genoese had been given too much. They turned [Galata](#) (Pera, across from Constantinople) that had been granted to them, an uncontrollable financial competitor of the capital, while they soon dominated the trade of the [Black Sea](#).³³ It is indicative that after 1261 Constantinople imported wheat from the Black Sea through Genoese traders.³⁴

Although its special status had already ceased to exist by the 12th century and its population continuously decreased after 1204 (so that it numbered barely 50,000 residents, when it fell into the hands of the Ottomans in [1453](#)) until the middle of the 15th century Constantinople remained a very important center of interregional trade, where large numbers of merchants, bankers and ship-owners resided.³⁵ The case of the Venetian Giacomo Badoer, a commercial banker whose accounting ledger has survived, is characteristic.³⁶ Badoer, settled in Constantinople during the period 1436-1440, was trading with other markets in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea through his agents or other merchants. Nevertheless, commercial traffic in the Byzantine capital was now under the control of Western merchants, especially Italians.³⁷ This was a result of the fact that the Eastern Mediterranean along with the Italian cities was now functioning as an international market, dominated by the Italians, and particularly Venice and Genoa, thanks to their commercial privileges and the colonies that they had founded. Byzantine merchants participated in long-distance trade, but they were playing the role of junior partners to the Italians. As regards regional and local trade, Byzantine merchants continued to play an important part – although foreign merchants had made their appearance – promoting their own interests, as well as those of the Italians as their intermediaries; in the latter case they facilitated long-distance trade.³⁸

It is remarkable that in the 14th and especially in the 15th century the aristocracy of Constantinople was involved in commerce, because of the loss of their lands to Ottoman expansion.³⁹ Even during the last period before the fall of 1453, while Constantinople was surrounded by the Ottomans, Constantinopolitan merchants were active in various places, such as the [Crimean peninsula](#) and the southern regions of the Black Sea.⁴⁰

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Glossary :

	annona A tax on land property; the proceeds were used towards the provisioning of cities (<i>annona civica</i>) or payment of the soldiers (<i>annona militaris</i>).
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Quotations

The historian Prokopios describes the arrival of the grain fleet from Alexandria to Constantinople (6th c.)

ήνικα οὖν ὁ σιταγωγὸς στόλος ἐκ πόλεως Ἀλεξανδρείας ἐνταῦθα ἴοι, εἰ μὲν ἐμπέσοι τὸ πνεῦμα ἐπίφορον σφίσι, δι' ὀλίγου μὲν οἱ ταύτην τὴν ἐργασίαν διαχειρίζοντες καταίρουσι ταῖς ναυσὶν ἐς τοὺς Βυζαντίους λιμένας, ἀποφορτίζομενοι δὲ ἀπαλλάσσονται αὐτίκα δὴ μάλα, ἐφ' ᾧ δὴ πρὸ τῆς τοῦ χειμῶνος ἅπαντες ὥρας δευτέρον τε καὶ τρίτον διαπεραιώσονται στόλον.

Procopios, *Buildings*, 5.1.10, ed. J. Haury, G. Wirth, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia IV: De aedificiis libri VI* (Lipsiae 1964), pp. 150.27-151.7.

The metropolitan of Athens Michael Choniates refers to the regions supplying the capital with goods (12th c.)

... τίνος γὰρ καὶ σπανίζετε; οὐ Μακεδονίας καὶ Θράκης καὶ Θετταλίας πυρφόροι πεδιάδες ὑμῖν γεωργοῦνται, οὐχ' ὑμῖν ληνοβατεῖται οἶνος ὁ Εὐβοεὺς καὶ Πτελεατικὸς καὶ Χίος καὶ Ῥόδιος, οὐ τὰς ἀμπεχόνας ὑμῖν ἰστουροῦσι Θηβαῖοι καὶ Κορίνθιοι δάκτυλοι, οὐ χρημάτων πάντες ὁμοῦ ποταμοὶ ὡς ἐς μίαν θάλασσαν τὴν βασιλίδα πόλιν συρρέουσιν;

Michael Choniates, Epistle 50, ed. F. Kolovou, *Michaelis Choniatae epistulae* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 41, Berlin - New York 2001), pp. 69.60-70.65.



The Spanish-Jew traveller Benjamin of Tudela comments on Constantinople as a global trade center (12th c.)

Εδώ [= στην Κωνσταντινούπολη] καταφθάνουν κάθε είδους έμποροι από τη γη της Βαβυλώνας (χαλιφάτου Βαγδάτης), από τη γη της Σενάρ (Μεσοποταμίας), από την Περσία, από τη Μηδία και από όλη την επικράτεια της γης της Αιγύπτου, από τη γη της Χαναάν και από την αυτοκρατορία της Ρωσίας, από την Ουγγαρία, την Πατζινακία, τη Χαζαρία, από τη γη της Λομβαρδίας και τη Σεφαράντ (Ισπανία). Είναι μια πολυάσχολη πόλη και καταφθάνουν σ' αυτήν έμποροι από παντού, από θάλασσα ή από ξηρά, και δεν υπάρχει άλλη πόλη παρόμοια εκτός απ' τη Βαγδάτη, τη μεγάλη πόλη του Ισλάμ.

Benjamin of Tudela, *Το βιβλίο των ταξιδιών στην Ευρώπη, την Ασία και την Αφρική, 1159-1173*, transl. Βλαχοπούλου, Φ., introduction, commentary Μεγαλομμάτης, Κ. – Σαββίδης, Α. (Αθήνα 1994), p. 65.