



## Summary :

Venetian presence in Constantinople is attested for more than thousand years - from the early 9<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the imperial power's change of hands – from the Byzantine state to the Ottoman one, the Venetian quarter in Constantinople was the hub for trade between the East and the West, developed mainly by Venetian merchants. The Venetian *bailo* (bailiff) was the representative of the Republic, who protected the interests of its citizens and became the first ever permanent ambassador in history.

## Date

9<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c.

## Geographical Location

Constantinople

### 1. The period 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries

Venetian merchants settled in Constantinople as early as the 9 c., following the merchants from another Italian town - [Amalfi](#). The first edict ([chrysobull](#)), issued by the Byzantine emperors Basil II (976-1025) and Constantine VIII (1025-1028), by which they granted privileges to Venetian merchants travelling to [Constantinople](#), dates to March 992.<sup>1</sup> It initiated a long-term series of privileges, granted by the Byzantine emperors to Italian merchants (from Venice, [Genoa](#) and Pisa), regulating their activity on the territory of the empire and its capital. This pattern of privileges accorded by means of edicts never ceased until the fall of the Byzantine Empire, was adopted by its Slavic neighbours and then preserved in the Ottoman Empire.

The most important document on the existence of a Venetian quarter in [Constantinople](#) is the chrysobull of Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118) in 1082.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the honourable titles conferred upon the [doge](#) and the Venetian patriarch in Grado, a big part of the document had to do with delimiting the boundaries of the Venetian quarter.<sup>3</sup> It was situated between the city gates of the Droungarios Watch (Odunkapi) and of the Hebrew, next to the market place of Pera (modern-day Balıkbazar – the fish market), on the southern shore of the Golden Horn; the quarter was to the north-west of [Hagia Sophia](#) and was crossed by the city walls. The place had been famous for a long time as the hub for the foreign merchants (mainly the [Jews](#)) in the Byzantine capital. The quarter encompassed several houses, the church of St Akyndinos (which had been Venetian long before that),<sup>4</sup> warehouses and three wharfs for the Venetian ships. The centre of the quarter was the *Embolon*, located in the vicinity of the Hebrew Gate, which was a portico with indoor market places. Venetians were granted the right to trade without paying the [kommerkion](#) or any other charges at the borders of the Empire. At that time it was determined that the weights and measures used by the merchants would be kept in the church of St. Akyndinos and that its priests would thus function as [notaries](#).<sup>5</sup> In 1111, Alexios I Komnenos granted the merchants of Pisa privileges and the establishment of a separate quarter of theirs, located in the same area and bordering on the Venetian quarter. The succeeding emperors of the [Komnenian dynasty](#) conferred further privileges upon Venice. [John II Komnenos](#) (1118-1143) issued an edict in 1126, which confirmed the privileges already granted; and [Manuel I Komnenos](#) (1143-1180) issued another one in 1148, which extended the boundaries of the Venetian quarter, to which another wharf (scala) was added – the *Scala Maior* (Scala Sancti Marci).

In the last years of Manuel Komnenos' reign, riots broke out in Constantinople, expressing the anti-Italian sentiments of the people. The desire of this emperor to restrict the Venetian monopoly by conferring trade privileges to Genoa



(chrysobull of 1170) triggered off a series of riots in the Byzantine capital. Attacks against the Genoese quarter gave cause for persecutions and arrests of 10.000 Venetian merchants from all over the empire, in the period 1170-1171; their property was confiscated.<sup>6</sup> The hostilities continued for about 10 years, (new pogroms and persecutions followed under [Andronikos I Komnenos](#)) and ceased after long-term negotiations and the constant damage claims on the part of the Venetians. Emperor Isaac II Angelos (1185-1195) issued three edicts (1187) in favour of the Venetians. In 1189 (during the [Third Crusade](#)), the Venetian quarter expanded to the detriment of the Genoese one, and one more wharf was conceded to them. In this period, the quarter also included the [Palace of Botaneiates or Kalamanos](#),<sup>7</sup> where the seat of the official administration was located. Since the merchants of Venice enjoyed big tax privileges many other merchants, mostly Jews, were attracted to their quarter. As regards the [Fourth Crusade](#) era, information about the organization of the colony is scarce and the names of the representatives appointed by Venice are not mentioned. The edicts mention envoys and magistrates.

## 2.The Fourth Crusade and the Latin Empire in Constantinople

Venice played an important role in the organization and carrying out of the Fourth Crusade. A big fire broke out during the siege of Constantinople in August 1203, and the Greeks looted the quarter of foreign merchants.

Immediately after the [capture of the Byzantine capital](#) on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1204 and the sack of the city by the Venetians and the Crusaders, who shared the plunder, the Latin rule was established. The doge Enrico Dandolo (1197-1205) became the governor of one-fourth of the territory of Byzantine Empire (*quartae partis et dimidia totius imperii Romaniae*). After his death, the ruler of Venetian possessions was elected by the Senate of Venice and was named [podestà](#).

During the Latin Empire era (1204-1261), the Venetian *podestà* in [Constantinople](#) (first Marino Zeno and after him Jacopo Tiepolo) became very influential. He functioned as minister of foreign affairs for the whole empire and he also dealt with the commercial activity and military affairs by organizing the naval defence of the short-lived empire of the Crusaders. It is noteworthy that he himself, without having been given extra powers by the Senate, concluded contracts and issued chrysobulls, undersigned in red ink in the manner of Byzantine emperors: in 1219 with the [emperor of Nicaea, Theodore I Lascaris](#) (1204-1222); and in 1220 with the [sultan of Iconium](#).<sup>8</sup> The organization under the rule of *podestà* included 6 advisors, 5 magistrates, 2 *camerarii* (financial advisors) and other officers. Under Latin rule, a number of churches in both Constantinople and the Galata district on the other shore of the Golden Horn came into the possession of the Venetians and members of the Catholic orders. The Venetian monopoly of the Levant trade had no competition during this period. The Venetian colonial Empire was established in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## 3. The last centuries on Byzantium – 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>

In [1261](#), after Constantinople became the capital of the reinstated Byzantine Empire once again, Venice fell out of favour and, in an attempt to neutralize its great influence, [Michael VIII Palaiologos](#) favoured the Genoese, allotting them a place in Galata where they created a flourishing fortified colony. The Venetian colony in Constantinople was superseded by the Genoese one, while the Palace of Botaneiates was demolished and transferred piece by piece to Genoa, where the [Banco di San Giorgio](#) was built. The churches which until then were possessed by the Venetians now passed under Genoese control and the authority of the archbishop of Genoa. So it remained yet later, under Ottoman rule. After 1261 the organization of the Venetian colony changed. At the head of it was the [bailo](#) (lat. *bajulus*, mean. bailiff)<sup>9</sup> – governor of the community and a permanent envoy of Venice to Constantinople. His functions were to



maintain the good relations with the Byzantine emperors and with the other foreign communities. His internal functions were to attend to the churches which were in the possession of the Venetians, and to preside the court which settled disputes between merchants and which gathered three times a week at the portico of the church of Santa Maria de Embulo (Theotokos at the Market) or in the *lobium* – the open gallery of his house. His financial responsibilities included administering large sums of money, as well as the property of the deceased Venetians, and maintaining control over and keep a tab on the revenues of the community. The powers of the *bailo* also included the monitoring of the cargo of the galleys and the implementation of the directions received from Venice (the Senate and the office of Cinque Savi della Mercanzia). The Venetian quarter, despite the attempts to be relocated in Pera, continued to exist during the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century. The *bailo* had his own residence – *palazzo* (plus a second one in Pera),<sup>10</sup> a separate one for his advisors, and a third premises designated for warehouse. The Venetians already possessed 4 churches.<sup>11</sup>

The trade of Venetian goods in the [Black Sea](#) was very active despite the numerous wars with Genoa, the expansion of the Ottoman Turks and the piracy boom. Galley convoys arrived in Constantinople and carried out the transportation of goods: the Levant exported silk, cotton, precious stones, timber, wheat and spices in large quantities; Venice and Western Europe exported textiles from Lombardy and Flanders, objects of craftsmanship and luxury goods. Numerous documents dating from the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> c. concerning the *bailo*'s office are preserved at the Venetian archives.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Ottoman Empire

The [conquest of Constantinople](#) by the Sultan Mehmed II in May 1453 put a temporary end to the Venetian community. The *bailo* was slain together with his family and the property of the Venetians as well as that of other foreigners was plundered. But after a period of time the Venetians came back to Constantinople. Venice had actually maintained good relations with the Ottomans before the fall of Byzantium. The treaties with the Ottoman empire retained the privileges of Venetian merchants, though to a lesser extent compared to the Byzantine era, because the Black Sea became less accessible for trade. All Sultans confirmed the privileges granted to the Venetians by their predecessors with charters, called *ahidname*, also known in the West as capitulations (1349, 1403, 1419, 1479, 1482, 1503, 1540, 1567, 1595, 1601). Trade concessions stipulated that all non-Muslims residing temporarily in the Ottoman empire were exempt from the capitation tax (jizya). The Venetian bailo resided in Pera where his palace was located until 1797 and is considered to be the first permanent ambassador in world history.<sup>13</sup>

1. Document in Latin version in *Storia della civiltà veneziana* I, V. Branca (ed.), (Firenze 1979), pp. 195-198; Thomas G., Tafel G., *Urkunden zur älteren Handels und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig mit besonderer Beziehung auf Byzanz und die Levante. I. Teil (814-1205)*, (Wien 1856, avat. Amsterdam 1964), pp. 36-39; Nicol, D., *Venezia e Bisanzio* (Milano 2001), pp. 61-62.

2. Nicol, D., *Venezia e Bisanzio* (Milano 2001), pp. 85-88, note 19 with bibliography. For different opinions on the date see Francopan, P., "Byzantine Trade privileges to Venice in the Eleventh Century: the Chrysobull of 1092", *Journal of Medieval History*, 30: 2 (2004), pp. 135-160; Jacoby, D., "The Chrysobull of Alexius I Comnenus to the Venetians: the date and the debate", *Journal of Medieval History* 28 (2002), pp. 199-204.

3. Balin, M.A., *Histoire de la latinité de Constantinople* (Paris 1894) with the references on historical topography of Constantinople, pp. 17-25; Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantin. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique* (Paris 1964), p. 248; See the map of Constantinople in Magdalino, P., "Medieval Constantinople: Built and environment and Urban development" in *The Economic history of Byzantium : from the seventh through the fifteenth century*, Laiou, A. (ed.), (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39-Washington, D.C. 2002), pp. 535 <http://www.doaks.org/EconHist/EHB20.pdf>.



4. According to Janin (Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique* (Paris 1964), p. 238), the church of Saint Akindynos initially belonged to the Greeks.
5. Thomas G., Tafel G., *Urkunden zur älteren Handels und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig mit besonderer Beziehung auf Byzanz und die Levante. 1. Theil (814-1205)*, (Wien 1856, ανατ. Amsterdam 1964), pp. 67-74.
6. Nicol, D., *Venezia e Bisanzio* (Milano 2001), pp. 132-133.
7. On the Palace of Botaneiates see Angold, M., "Inventory of the so-called Palace of Botaneiates" in *The Byzantine Aristocracy IX-XIII Centuries*, M. Angold (ed.), *BAR International Series* 221 (1984), pp. 254-266. On the Kalamanos family see Polemis, D.I., *The Doukai. A contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London 1968), pp. 123-124.
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Glossary :

**bailo**

Bailo was the representative of Venice at Constantinople during the Byzantine Empire. His office was quite important, that's why only members of the



venetian aristocracy were appointed at it. The bailo was a man of particular education and his diplomatic presence at the Sublime Port was decisive. The reports of the bailos' and their mention in the venetian administration constitute important documents which are often true handbooks of political, military and financial science and therefore important sources for the modern historian.

#### Banco di San Giorgio

The most important financial institution of the Republic of Genoa, founded in 1407 through the consolidation of Genoa's public debt. The administration of the bank constituted the wealthiest men of the state who had the right to collect a series of taxes. In the 15th century the territorial possessions of Genoa were placed under the bank's administration as guarantees for future loans. The Palazzo San Giorgio built in 1260 was the seat of the bank.

#### chrysobull

(gold seal) Imperial document of the Byzantine state which was so named because it bore the gold seal of the emperor.

#### doge

Title of the highest ruler.

#### kommerkion

This name had two meanings in Byzantium 1. *Commercium* (lat.), which in late Roman times designated the frontier cities where exchanges with foreign merchants were authorised. 2. *Kommerkion*, which was a circulation and sales tax, paid at the customs, and collected on merchandise imported into the empire and on merchandise reaching Constantinople by the sea. It appears in the sources c. 800 and was also called *dekate*, its rate being 10 percent of the merchandise value.

#### notary (lat. notarius)

An official who registered transactions and certified documents.

#### podesta or potesta

(lat. Potestas – power): name given to certain high officials in many Italian cities. The podesta was also:

a) governor of the Venetian sector of the Latin Empire of Constantinople.

b) head of the Genoese City Hall (14th-15th centuries) , governor in the Genoese acquisitions of Romania (Galata and Chios).

c) Lombard magistrate in Euboea.

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## Chronological Table

992: first chrysobull in favor of Venetian merchants

1082: the chrysobull of Alexius I Comnenus for Venetian quarter in Constantinople

1204-1261: Latin Empire of Constantinople

1268-1453: Venetian bailo in Constantinople

1453: fall of Constantinople

15-16 c.: treaties with Ottoman sultans