



Summary :

Throughout its long history, Constantinople was repeatedly affected by fires. Fires, as well as earthquakes, comets or solar eclipses, were interpreted as divine signs or warnings, so their commemoration was often included in the liturgical calendar. Among the Byzantine chroniclers, the historian Niketas Choniates was the one to provide most information on fires in Constantinople, since he experienced at least five of them.

Date

4th- 15th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Introduction

In the scale of human fears, the fear of fire and the fear caused by a solar eclipse are considered to rank the highest.¹ It took a long time for man to overcome his primitive fear of fire, but the fear of conflagration, and particularly the fear of being burnt alive on the fire remained. Besides, in the Byzantine era, as well as in the subsequent periods, fires remained an everyday danger. And fires, as well as earthquakes, comets or solar eclipses, were interpreted as announcement of enormous evils. A characteristic example of this was the fire of September the 1st, 465, which was included in the [Synaxarion of Constantinople](#) and was annually commemorated in the liturgical calendar.²

2. Fires in Constantinople

In Byzantium, the danger of a fire threatened mainly the largest cities, especially Constantinople. The great city at the Bosphoros had in every quarter a fire brigade (which consisted of the so-called *collegiati*), who were under the authority of the *eparch*, the [prefect of the city](#).³ However, in the long history of Constantinople, as [Nikephoros Gregoras](#) points out,⁴ numerous fires were recorded. It has been estimated that about thirty-nine major fires broke out in the Byzantine Constantinople, from 388 the earliest to 1434 the latest.⁵

Sometimes fires could be used as a threat in times of riots or political conflicts. Such was the case in 1057, in the riots that brought about the dethronement of Emperor Michael VI Stratiotikos (1056-1057). In that case, the rebels roused the city, caused turbulences, threatened with fire and other hardships. As regards fires in other cities and regions of the Byzantine Empire, only scarce evidence has been preserved. This is further proof that, in the eyes of the Byzantine writers and the subjects of the Byzantine Empire, [Constantinople](#) was literally the centre of the world. An exemption is [Trebizond](#), mainly because of the thoroughness of its chronicler [Michael Panaretos](#), who has recorded five fires in the capital of the [Empire](#) at the Pontos.

3. The testimony of Niketas Choniates

Among the Byzantine writers, especially those who lived in the later Byzantine centuries, [Niketas Choniates](#) is the one who has recorded most about the fires in Constantinople. Certainly, this comes as no surprise, since Niketas witnessed the tumultuous events of the years before and immediately after the [conquest](#) of the Byzantine capital by the [crusaders](#). And it is precisely his account of the fire that broke out in August 1203 - due to arson by the crusaders - that is the most elaborate and extensive. On the contrary, he refers to a fire before 1194 only *en passant*, and offers only a summary account of the fire of July 17, 1203.

The account of the fire of August of 1203 in Constantinople is very detailed. Knowing that there was no more fearsome a way to take revenge of the city and to frighten its inhabitants, the crusaders decided, after the most recent fire – Choniates here means that on July 17, 1203 – to expose Constantinople once again at the mercy of a fire inferno. They set fire at certain points which quickly



spread to all directions, completely out of control. Destroying everything that stood on its way, the fire was raging all night and the entire next day, and it was reduced only when it started getting dark. Niketas Choniates deplors that major fires had plagued the city before, but compared to this one, those were merely sparks. It was impossible to describe the spectacle of this fire. Flames seemed to break off and spread at all directions, and then again were united to a huge river of fire. The colonnades were collapsing, the sculptures at the squares were breaking down and the beautiful columns were vanishing in flames like bushes on fire. Nothing could resist against the heat of the fire. Pieces of fire were flying in the air in front of the eyes of helpless and terrified inhabitants of Constantinople and were causing new fires in houses, which until then had been saved from the menace and had remained untouched by the tongues of flames. It looked like they were being launched by war machines, and in a flash they were consuming the intervals until any buildings that had not been on fire yet; and then, after they had destroyed everything there as well, they were returning back. At the beginning the fire, carried away by the force of the north wind, followed a straight course; then, however, changed direction as though it was driven by the south wind, and turned back to destroy everything on its way. The fire even threatened the church of [Hagia Sophia](#), and turned many quarters into mere ashes. Not even the bricks or the deep substructures were spared; everything succumbed like a torch to the power of the fire inferno. The first spark was set in the trader's inn (*mitaton*) of the [Muslims](#), namely on the northern coastal part of the city, and from there the fire spread towards the direction of [Hagia Sophia](#). Directed westwards it reached as far as Perama, on the shores of [Golden Horn](#) and from there it poured out to the entire city. Driven by an enormous force and surpassing in scale any previous incidence, the fire destroyed buildings outside the walls, whereas the burning coals flying over the air set on fire a ship that was sailing nearby. Vast parts of the capital were burnt down, not even the [Hippodrome](#) was spared - its entire western side was totally burnt, as well as everything lying at the interval between it and Hagia Sophia. With the fire roaming across the city like an endless burning-hot river, it was impossible for the people to help each other. Most of the inhabitants were throwing their things away as soon as the fire arrived; and the fire reached even places that nobody expected it to reach. Some people tried to carry over things to other parts of the city, but to no avail, since the fire seemed to be everywhere and threatened every part of the city. In short, it was impossible for anyone to hide from the fire inferno. «Woe! – Niketas Choniates concludes his account – «where are now all these beautiful and splendid palaces with their rich ornaments, with their abundant wealth and with all these things that were enchanting anybody?»⁶

4. The testimony of Geoffroi de Villehardouin

Another eyewitness, Geoffroi de Villehardouin – from the enemy side of the Latins – also draws a picture of what happened at that time in Constantinople. He insists that the fire was so great and fearsome, that nobody was able to put it down or to control it. When the Latin barons saw from their military camp - located on the other side of the harbor - the way tall churches, rich palaces and traders' quarters were collapsing and disappearing in flames, they expressed their deep sorrow, but were unable to help. The fire won across the harbor and affected the largest part of the city, as far as the shore on the other side and the church of Hagia Sophia. It roamed for eight days and nobody was able to put it down. Nobody could estimate the extent of the damage, or the money and the wealth lost during those days, or the men and the women and children that had been burnt alive. The Latins settled at Constantinople, who according to the sayings of the French nobleman amounted to fifteen thousands, were getting ferried across the Asian seashore of Bosphoros. Geoffroi Villehardouin concludes his description of the fire inferno (a description which is briefer, but in no point contradictory to the one by Choniates) with the telling claim that this event shattered any confidence between the Greeks and the Latins.⁷ Moreover, it was the prelude of the impending destruction, not only for the inhabitants of Constantinople, but for all the subjects of the Byzantine Empire.

5. Fires before and after the Fall in 1453

About the last major fire that affected Constantinople in its Byzantine days writes George Sphrantzes. The fire broke out on January 29, 1434, three hours after the sunset, and burnt down the beautiful church of the [Virgin of Blachenrai](#). The Byzantine historian learned about this event by an unknown man while on a journey – he was crossing the river Nestos in Macedonia – two days after, namely on February 1, 1434. In the beginning he did not believe, especially when, during his journey, passed through five monasteries and nobody knew anything about this fact. However, while in the sixth monastery that was on his way, located on Rhaedestos in Thrace, he realized that the unknown man had not lied to him: the news about the great fire in the capital were finally confirmed.



[Constantinople](#), which fall into the hands of the Turks in [1453](#) and became thereafter the capital of the Ottoman Empire, experienced a long series of fires in its later history as well. According to the afore-mentioned study, the available historical sources have recorded ninety-two fires at the city, throughout its Ottoman and Modern period; the earliest in 1490 and the latest in 1941.

1. Jerotić, V., "Strah i religija", *Bogoslovlje* 32 /46 (Beograd 1988), p. 105.
2. *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae: Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris*, ed. H. Delehaye (Bruxelles 1902), p. 6, 3-9.
3. *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, II (New York – Oxford 1991), p. 786, s.v. "Fire" (B. Croke).
4. Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina Historia, ed. L. Schopen – I. Bekker, I (Bonnae 1829), pp. 87-88.
5. Schneider, A. M., «Brände in Konstantinopel», *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 41.2 (Jan. 1941), pp. 382-9. Cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 2 (New York – Oxford 1991), p. 786, s.v. "Fire" (B. Croke).
6. Νικήτας Χωνιάτης, *Χρονική διήγησις*, ed. J. A. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* I (CFHB 11, New York-Berlin 1975), pp. 553-5. Cf. Quotation 2.
7. Geoffrey de Villehardouin, *Memoirs or Chronicle of The Fourth Crusade and The Conquest of Constantinople*, trans. Frank T. Marzials (London 1908), pp. 51-2. Cf. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/villehardouin.asp>

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	Madden Th. F. , "The Fires of the Fourth Crusade in Constantinople, 1203–1204: A Damage Assessment", <i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i> , 84/85, 1991-1992, 72-93
	Radić R. , <i>Strah u poznoj Vizantiji, 1180-1453, II</i> , Beograd 2000
	Schneider A.M. , "Brände in Konstantinopel", <i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i> , 41, 1941, 382-403
	Croke B. , "Fire", <i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i> 2, New York – Oxford 1991, 786

Glossary :

	praefectus urbi (prefect of the city) (later referred to as the <i>eparch</i> of the city) Administrator and virtual governor of Constantinople in the Early/Middle Byzantine Era. He was responsible for the surveillance and the harmonious life of the Capital. One of his responsibilities was to control the commercial and manufacturing activities of Constantinople. After 1204, however, the office began to diminish, while from the 14th century, his responsibilities were assumed by two officers, the so-called <i>kephalatikeontai of the capital</i> .
	Synaxarion of Constantinople A compilation of brief accounts on every saint that was celebrated during a liturgical year, arranged by months. It was one of the first and most thorough compilation of synaxaria and it is considered a valuable source for the Byzantine studies. Its compilation must be dated to the 10th century and was probably linked to the tradition of the Church of Constantinople. It was the model for many synaxaria compiled later (such as the Menologion of Basil II), and it was completed or slightly altered in some parts through the years. It was published in 1902 by the Belgian scholar Hippolyte Delehaye (<i>Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano</i> [Bruxelles 1902]).



Sources

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Quotations

Niketas Choniates's account of the devastating fire of August 1203

And, indeed, after taking up positions in a goodly number of locations, they set fire to the buildings. The flames rose unbelievably high above the ground throughout that night, the next day, and the following evening as they spread everywhere. It was a novel sight, defying the power of description. While in the past many conflagrations had taken place in the City - no one could cite how many and of what sort they had been - the fires ignited at this time proved all the others to be but sparks. The flames divided, took many different directions and then came together again, meandering like a river of fire. Porticoes collapsed, the elegant structures of the agorae toppled, and huge columns went up in smoke like so much brushwood. Nothing could stand before those flames. Even more extraordinary was the fact that burning embers detached themselves from this roaring and raging fire and consumed buildings at a great distance. Even more extraordinary was the fact that burning embers detached themselves from this roaring and raging fire and consumed buildings at a great distance. Shooting out at intervals, the embers darted through the sky, leaving a region untouched by the blaze, and then destroying it when they turned back and fell upon it. The fire, advancing for the most part in a straight course driven by a north wind, was soon observed to turn aside as though fanned by a south wind, to move aslant, turning this way and that way as it unexpectedly charred and burned everything. Even the Great Church was endangered.

Niketas Choniates, *Historia* [ed. J. van Dieten, pp. 553-4], transl. by H. J. Mangoulias, *O city of Byzantium: annals of Niketas Choniates* (Detroit 1984), pp. 303.

Chronological Table

Fires in Constantinople (until 1453):

The summer of 388

On July 12, 400

On June 20, 404

On October 25, 406

On April 15, 428



On August 17, 433

In 448

On September 1-2, 465

In 475

In 498

In 509

In 510

On November 6, 512

On January 15-17, 532. (during the well-known Nika Riots)

On July 548

On May 13, 559

On December 560

On October 12, 561

On December 563

On April 583

In 603

On August 10, 626

On December 790

In 886/887

The spring of 912

The summer of 931

On August 6, 1040

After September 1069

Before 1194

On July 25, 1197

On July 17/18, 1203 (caused by the crusaders of the Fourth Crusade)



On August 19-20, 1203

On April 12/13, 1204 (upon the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders)

On July 25, 1261 (after the reconquest of the city, the Byzantines set on fire the Latin quarters)

On November 1291

In 1303

In 1308

On August 1351

On January 29, 1434