Authoring : *Kiriakidis Savvas*
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Summary :

The alimentation of the population with the necessary quantity of foods is essential for the survival of the residents and the smooth operation of institutions based on which a city is managed. The success or failure of the feed-in process of the city influences every form of social life. In the case of Constantinople, the regular supply of population with food based on which was a matter of enormous importance, as it ensured the smooth operation of the entire empire.

Date

4th-15th c.

Geographical Location

Constantinople

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1. Food supply in Constantinople from its foundation until the 7th century

Constantinople as every medieval city constituted a society of consumers and not of producers. Consequently, the survival of the residents of the capital depended to a large degree on the supply of goods that were imported by other provinces. This rendered possible the creation of a well-organised system of transport, maintenance and distribution of foodstuff. In the first centuries since the foundation of Constantinople the food supply was provided both by the state and the private initiative. The state practised control of supply through the Prefect (Eparch) of Constantinople. This rank was created the 359 and corresponded to the rank that existed in Rome. Among the responsibilities of the prefect, who acted always under the commands or the supervision of the emperor, was the control of the commercial activities that were developed in the capital. Through the prefect the emperor controlled the quantities of foods that were available for consumption and supervised the benefit of cereals, as well as other necessary available goods.[1]

Constantine I in his effort to attract residents from other regions in the new capital of Roman Empire provided free contribution of foodstuff named annona. It is not certain whether this included more goods than bread. It is likely however that they included oil, wine, dry-salted foods and lard. Given that during the 4th century the offer of foods was greater than the demand, the distribution of free contributions was quite generous. It is estimated that in 430 Constantinople had roughly 250.000 residents and the state distributed 80.000 annonai. The aim of this practice was not only the alimentation of the residents but also the increase of the emperor's popularity.[2]

In the first centuries since the foundation of Constantinople the supplies of wheat from Egypt covered ¾ of its alimentary needs in wheat. The increase of population, which was the result of various factors (mainly the imperial policy, the inevitable attraction that the new capital practised in rich members of the senatorial order, and the advantages of urban life) intensified the importance of Egypt as supplier of cereals. Additionally this close dependence is attributed to the sovereign role of bread in the diet of the residents of Constantinople. The cost of preparation in combination with the low incomes of the residents of Constantinople limited the choices of cereals that could be cooked, in barley or in cheaper wheat. Coinstantaneously, the most affluent social classes consumed cereals of higher quality.[3]

During the 6th century the problems of administration and control, as well as the difficulties that resulted because of an excessive increase of population, led the emperors to take measures that aimed at the control of the growth of the city. Imperial power had the ability of checking the locomotion of populations and of prohibiting the surge of a large number of immigrants in Constantinople if it was deemed that their alimentation would be difficult. One of the measures to restrict further demographic growth of the city was the imposition of a limit to those eligible for the free distribution of foodstuff. Another factor that probably slowed down the increase of population, to which degree remains unknown, was the famine of 542, which caused the death of an unclear number of people. It has been argued that the need of Constantinople for foodstuffs was decreased considerably in the second half of the 6th c.[4]

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The disposal of foods that reached Constantinople was realised through various installations that were directed by various guilds that enjoyed several privileges. The guild of ovens was one of the most important. They had the responsibility to impose to their members to work according to the law.[5]

The *Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae* inform us that in first half of the 5th century there were six warehouses of foods (horrea) in Constantinople, which were located near the harbours of Golden Horn and the sea of Marmara. In each of the above constructions different products were stored. For example, in a warehouse in Golden Horn supplies of oil were safeguarded and in another one supplies of wine. Since wine, oil and bread were provided via the institution of annona, the six big warehouses of Constantinople were under the strict control of the state. Without doubt more deposits existed, perhaps some small and private. The same source refers to five macella. Macellum was a shop of foods that initially sold mainly meat and fish and later only meat. The Notitia shows also the existence of nineteen public ovens, which were concentrated in specific regions, as well as an uncertain number of private ovens. Other studies speculate that in the sixth century between the fora of Constantine and Theodosius there were 22 ovens. In the above manufactures we need to add the fora of various emperors, the role of which was not restricted only in ceremonies, but it was also extended in commercial activities.[6]

2. 7th-8th century

The seventh century was a period of economic crisis and uncertainty for the Byzantine Empire. This crisis is immediately connected with the dramatic decrease of regions under Byzantine sovereignty. The impact of this development was intense in Constantinople, the population of which reduced considerably. An important development regarding the alimentation of the capital was the interruption of the wheat supplies from Egypt, which in 618 was conquered by the Persians and after it was temporarily recaptured by the Byzantines, it was lost forever in 641 by the Arabs. The same period the annonai were annulled or considerably limited, apart from those that were intended for the army, while the price of bread was placed under the control of the state.[7] The loss of Egypt and the reduction of population increased the importance of the regions around Constantinople for its alimentation.[8] Moreover, it is likely that Constantinople was supplied with foods from North Africa and Sicily. However, the missions of supplies from Carthage, Catania or Syracuses, if they actually took place, were sporadic and of small volume. In every case, Sicily soon interrupted the supply of goods to Byzantium.[9] In addition, the regions of the Black Sea provided small production of cereals and they could contribute only in the event of urgent need, while there are few references for the supply of goods from Greece and Asia Minor.[10]

In the end of the seventh and in the beginning of eighth century the ability of Constantinople to nourish its population was questioned by the sieges of 674-678, 717-718 and 742. The exclusion of the city from the sea during the sieges by the Arabs and the Avars constituted the region of Thrace as the more important source of food supply to Constantinople. The reduction of population of the city, as well as the imposition of urgent measures, as the expulsion of residents that were unable to satisfy their alimentary needs exclusively depending on their personal supplies, contributed in the successful defence of Constantinople. The minimal available historical sources show that after the end of the Arabic sieges and the repression of general Artabasdos' revolt, who had been excluded in Constantinople by the emperor Constantine V, the balance in the capital's food supply, as well as the safeguarding of important roads via which the distribution of goods took place were restored.[11]

3. 9th-12th century

From the ninth until the twelfth century a continuous increase of population took place in Constantinople. The demographic increase was not accompanied by lack of foods since Constantinople, as other cities in the wider region, was favoured by the growth of trade in the Mediterranean. The Byzantine state kept active attendance of the demographic growth of Constantinople and it checked the distribution of sources of wealth and supported various population groups.[12] Another important development was the progressive restriction of the official role of the state in the distribution and consumption of foods in Constantinople.

The main units for the consumption of foods were the aristocratic houses, the church and the state. All these were more or less

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depended on the support of the emperor who granted them enormous lands for exploitation not only in the outskirts of Constantinople but also in the rest of the empire. The analysis of the available evidence during the twelfth century shows that a very important and continuously increasing percentage of the cultivable land was exploited by the great aristocratic houses of Constantinople, which possessed the great volume of food production sources intended for the capital of the empire. This had as a result that the state would grant the responsibility of the management of sources to the great aristocratic houses of Constantinople and to institutions, such as the Church, which thus acquired the ability of nourishing themselves and their dependends from the production of properties granted to them by the throne. Any surplus of production was promoted to the market.[13]

The state and the powerful landowners in Constantinople maintained big warehouses of cereals. It is also certain that they owned the means of transportation and process of foods, such as carriages, boats, mills, ovens. Often, however, the great landowners did not receive the food produced but collected pecuniary rent and taxes from cultivators. In this case the consumer in Constantinople bought his food with money that were acquired from the producer. The historian and high-ranking government official of the second half of the eleventh century Michael Attaleiates reports an indicative example of collection and distribution of foods. He writes that the producers transported with their carriages cereals in Raidestos where they allocated them to the public.[14] Their aim was to acquire money in order to pay their taxes. The purchasers were most likely members of the aristocracy and of ecclesiastical institutions that promoted food to Constantinople.[15] Sources also verify the existence of small harbours that were named *σκάλαι* (skalai), the ownership of which was granted to various owners provided with imperial decrees. In these harbours there were markets that provided food, and they were exploited by the owners of these harbours which usually were various charitable institutions.[16]

Another important development from the second half the eleventh century is the increasing role of the Venetians and the Genoese tradesmen in the import of foods to Constantinople. The available sources and the later sovereignty of Italian tradesmen in the region give the impression that the Venetians and the Genoese managed the main volume of food supply in Constantinople. For instance, the Venetians imported in Constantinople olive oil and cheese from the Aegean and they had, as the Genoese too, important commercial bases in Almyros, which was the main center for the concentration of cereals from Thessaly. However, the sovereignty of the Italian cities does not mean that they monopolized the food supply in Constantinople. It is doubtful whether they had the ability to manage all the imports of Constantinople. In addition, they had to rival tradesmen of other Italian cities, such as Amalfi, as well as Byzantine ships that belonged to major Byzantine monasteries, such as the Lavra and the Kosmosoteira.[17]

To sum, despite the numerous civil conflicts and the supposed incompetence of late twelfth century emperors, such as Isaakios III, the sources do not report incidents demonstrating lack of foods or important increase in prices during this period.

4. 1261-1453

In 1204, as a result of the Fourth Crusade, the Crusaders occupied Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire was disintegrated. In 1261, the army of the Empire of Nicaea, which rose to prominence as the most powerful of the successor states of the Byzantine Empire, recaptured Constantinople and re-established the Byzantine Empire, which was smaller and poorer comparing to previous periods, and allocated limited economic resources. Afterwards 1261, and mainly from the middle of the 14th century, Constantinople was the capital of an ever-diminishing empire. Also the progressive and most probably continuous reduction of population meant that at a great percentage the city had the ability of sustaining itself on its own sources.

In the late period the role of the Italian tradesmen in the market of Constantinople increased. This development had as a result the concentration of trade in the Golden Horn, where the Venetian, Genoese and Pisan tradesmen had settled. The decision for the drastic reduction of the Byzantine fleet in 1285 is considered as the main cause for the increase of the economic dependence on foreign naval powers.[18] The increasing role of Italian tradesmen in the food supply of Constantinople is reflected on the city's considerable dependence on the shipments of cereals that Genoese ships transported from Kaffa, the Genoese colony in the Crimea. This dependence however involved dangers. For example, when the Mongols collided with the Genoese and blockaded Kaffa, Constantinople was threatened with hunger.

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During the last centuries of the Byzantine Empire unfavourable military developments impeded the alimentation of Constantinople. Shortly after the recapture of Constantinople, Michael VIII, frightened of a possible attack of Western European forces, he considered necessary to transport a great number of soldiers inside the city, to import big quantities of cereals from other regions of the empire and to distribute animals to the residents. In 1306, cultivation in the outskirts of Constantinople was prohibited. This measure was taken to prevent the soldiers of the Catalan Company, who had turned against the Byzantines, from nourishing themselves from the booty that they seized from the Byzantines.[19] Moreover, cases such as the blockade of Constantinople by the Ottomans from 1396 to 1403 had as a result the dramatic increase of the price of cereals, deaths from hunger and the escape of many residents. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the quantities of cereals that were sent as aid from Italy reached their destination.

The fact that during the 15th century Constantinople depended to a great degree on its own sources is attested in the comment of a western European in 1437, who marked that in Constantinople hardly live 40.000 people who are nourished by their own vines and fields inside the city.[20]

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3. Φ. Κουκουλές, "Ονόματα και είδη άρτων", in *Βυζαντινών βίος και πολιτισμός*, V (Αθήνα 1948-1952) p. 47-62; J. Teall, "The Grain Supply of the Byzantine Empire," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 13 (1959) p. 92.

4. J. Durliat, "L'approvisionnement", p. 21; Teall, "The Grain Supply", p. 92.

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13. P. Magdalino, "The Grain Supply", p. 36.

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Glossary :

annona

A tax on land property; the proceeds were used towards the provisioning of cities (*annona civica*) or payment of the soldiers (*annona militaris*).

Catalan Company, the

(almugavares, compagnia) A group of fully-armed and highly-trained Catalans mercenary warriors, who numbered a few thousand. In 1303 they came to the assistance of Byzantium against the Turks, but soon they turned against the Empire and took to large-scale looting. They conquered the Burgundian duchy of Athens, after the battle of Orchomenos in Copais, in 1311.

forum

The marketplace, which was the center of public life in the Byzantine city. It was usually rectangular, embellished with honorific columns, imperial statues, and nymphaea.

macellum

Meat market.

praefectus urbi (prefect of the city)

(later referred to as the *eparch* of the city) Administrator and virtual governor of Constantinople in the Early/Middle Byzantine Era. He was responsible for the surveillance and the harmonius 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 *kephalatikeuontai of the capital.*

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Chronological Table

359: Enactment of the rank of the Eparch of the City.

641: Loss of Egypt which was Constantinople's main supplier of grain.

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Middle of the 7th c: End of free food distribution.

9th - 12th c.: Constant population growth and development of commerce in the Mediterranean.

1204: Conquest of Constantinople by the army of the Fourth Crusade.

1261: Recapture of Constantinople by the Byzantines.

14th - 15th c. Significant dependence on the merchants of the Italian states. The population decrease meant that Constantinople was depended to a great extent on the agricultural production inside the walls.