

Jonathan Harris. *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. ix + 288 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4742-5464-9.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Jonathan Harris's *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium* is a good general introduction to the history of this important medieval city. It is aimed at students but is also suitable for the general reader who wants to know more about Constantinople's history, monuments, and significance. Eight chapters illuminate the city thematically from its fourth-century refoundation through its twelfth-century heyday. Another four chapters cover "The Latin interlude" and the city after the Crusader sack of 1204 up to "today" in a briefer way. There follow appendices (a time line and list of emperors), endnotes with primary and secondary citations in author-date format, a further reading list (books and online), a bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and an index. Twelve brief text boxes, four maps, and twenty small black-and-white illustrations are scattered unevenly throughout the book. This is a revised and expanded version of a 2007 first edition. Harris does not assume knowledge of Greek language, Byzantine history, or modern Istanbul but gives a coherent and accessible introduction to Constantinople. A summary of the chapters and a note on a few typographical errors are given in this review.

Harris introduces Constantinople to the reader via the impression of the city made upon Sigurd Magnusson, king of Norway, circa 1110. This first

chapter, "City of Wonders," nicely sets up the format for this book: Constantinople at its medieval twelfth-century height forms the basic element of thematic analysis, but always (as for these Greek-speaking Romans) with a view backward to the eras of Justinian and the city's founder, Constantine. Harris emphasizes the exceptional grandeur, size, and scale of Constantinople. She dwarfed all other remaining cities of the Roman Empire as well as former western Roman imperial and cross-frontier territories, and all but a few eastern cities. Technology, age, and sophistication set her apart, and above, both for her own residents and visitors, especially those from the West. Harris characterizes Constantinople as a city of ancient and medieval mythology entwined with financial, monumental, and Christian spiritual power. He uses the visit of the Norwegians, and an anonymous eleventh-century Latin traveler of *Tarragonensis* 55, to set up his constant theme in this book: how the physical landscape of Constantinople interacted with its institutions and history to form both a real and legendary city for her inhabitants and visitors both friendly and warlike.

The second chapter, "Founding Fathers," jumps from the tenth-century mosaic in Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) cathedral back to the two men depicted: the emperors Constantine and Justinian. Both shaped Constantinople in funda-

mental ways and were also the subject of medieval legends alongside less historical Christian “fathers” such as St. Andrew (supposed founder of the church). Constantine’s legacy was the city itself; Justinian’s its monumental core, from his vanished equestrian statue and the Chalke (Bronze Gate to the Imperial Palace to the churches of Hagia Sophia, Hagia Irene (Holy Peace), Holy Apostles, Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, and the Mother of God at Blachernae. These churches, and the central role of Christian religion in Constantinople, segue nicely into the third chapter, “The God-Guarded City.” Harris emphasizes Constantinople’s unique status, never sacked in late antiquity or the Middle Ages until 1204, despite dire threats. This led locals (and others) to see the city as protected by piety and the patronage of Mary the *Theotokos* (God-Bearer), whose icons, belt, and robe were activated by collective devotional practices such as hymns, processions, prayers, and liturgies. There were also the “practical” defenses of a peninsular city with strong land and sea walls, Greek fire, and a flexible system of internal power transfer.

The myriad ways that supposedly autocratic power passed from emperor to emperor while the “Byzantine” bureaucracy and institutions endured are the focus of chapter 4, “Palaces and Power.” Emperors enjoyed status and riches but maintained their precarious position atop an urban society through warfare, intrigue, ceremonies, largesse, and legends of “divine” choice in the absence of any constitutional system for transfer of power or dynastic legitimacy. The palaces were offices as well as homes, giving women and eunuch officials venues for the exercise of power. Some families did hold on to power over several generations, and Harris makes a closer study of the Angeloi pre-1204, the writer-officials Michael Psellos and Niketas Choniates, and avenues for social mobility via the army or a classical Greek education. Chapter 5 then moves on to “Churches and Monasteries” (there were more than three hundred of each by circa 1200); their rich repertoire of forms

and decoration; and their many inhabitants and parishioners, from clerics, monks, and nuns to holy fools and stylites. There are again vivid examples: Symeon the New Theologian, Constantine IX, and the church of St. George Mangana.

Chapter 6 focuses on Constantinople’s wealth, from cold, hard cash, gold, and silks to the roots of this prosperity: systematic taxation, trade between East and West, production capabilities, gifts to impress, and a complex economy with continued access to resources. Chapter 7, “Democracy,” then considers how this wealth was distributed in the city and what sort of political power was exercised by the people. Public baths, hospitals, orphanages, and sometimes education were administered by a state that was intertwined, but never entirely synonymous, with the church. Food was often distributed and festivals might also feature chariot racing, while guilds looked after their members and popular opinion expressed by acclamation or riots could raise or lower emperors. The emperor was a representative of God, viewed above the patriarch (archbishop) as benefactor of the poor, elderly, and sick via bread and circuses delivered through the church. The last thematic chapter, “Outsiders,” turns back gradually to the visiting Latins of chapter 1 via the many “internal” Constantinopolitan outsiders of women, homosexual men, the disabled, non-Christians, and non-Greek-speakers. Harris brings out the ambiguity in Orthodox Christian doctrine and practice from the sixth to the twelfth century, and the growing hostility to Latin-speaking Catholic Christians.

Harris then departs from this thematic treatment by focusing his last four chapters in turn on the sack of 1204 and short-lived Latin “interlude” in Constantinople; the “Indian summer” of the restored Palaiologan Dynasty in the fourteenth century; the Turkish conquest of 1453 and its aftermath; and finally, “Byzantine Constantinople today.” He well outlines the internecine strife that helped bring the Venetian and Frankish Fourth Crusaders to sack Constantinople in 1204, and the

immense loss to the West of relics, statues, wealth, and status which resulted. Religious disputes and military defeats exploded, and the city and empire could no longer draw tax revenues, so the city was forever changed even when the Byzantine nobility reclaimed their city and throne later in the thirteenth century. The Palaiologoi might rebuild palaces and recover imperial prerogatives, but their rule in Constantinople was of a city-state rather than an empire, and was enabled both by threats against the Turks from Central Asia, and the return of Italian merchants and their resurgent religious and economic power. Still, Andronicus had a long reign, and Harris pays attention to the career of Theodore Metochites and the decoration of the Chora Monastery as an example for this fruitful “final” era of Byzantium as well as Christian-ruled Constantinople. The last two chapters focus on “the ruin of Byzantine Constantinople” in and after 1453, and then what may be seen of fourth- to fourteenth-century Constantinople by a visitor today. This excellent book animates these monuments and ruins in new ways for anyone who wishes to know more about the people and practices of a millennium of Byzantine Constantinople.

Some typographical errors I noted include: p. 16, “or” instead of “on,” and p. 96, reduplication of “once,” and the word “was” is omitted on p. 128 and “to” on p. 138. There is an extra “the” before “St. Mark’s” on p. 161, and the summary in text box 12 on p. 206 seems oddly truncated.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

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