

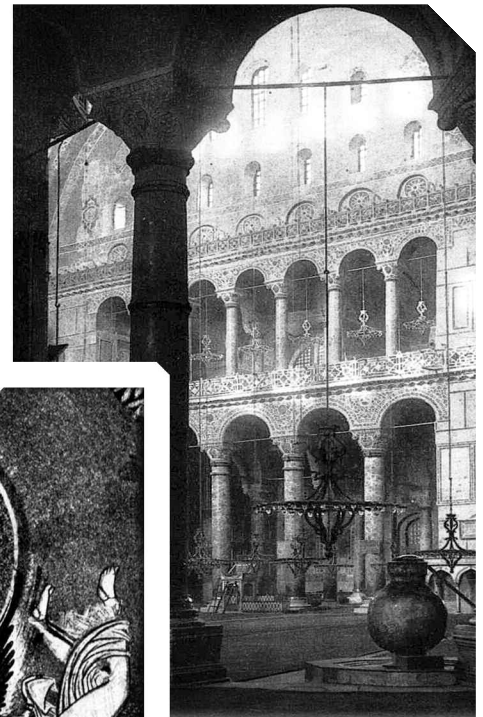
GURPS

Fourth Edition

Hot Spots:

CONSTANTINOPLE

527-1204 A.D.TM



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An e23 Sourcebook for GURPS®

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INTRODUCTION

Popular knowledge about history goes something like this: The Romans built a huge empire. It became decadent and was invaded by barbarians. The empire collapsed, and then the Dark Ages engulfed Europe, followed at some point by the rest of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the modern age.

As with many beliefs about history, these are half-truths. Certainly, Rome fell, slowly and painfully, to barbarians and its own internal problems, but Rome was not the empire, nor the whole of Europe. *Half* of the empire, west of the Adriatic, collapsed into an impoverished collection of successor states. After a period of political chaos and economic depression, these small states became the nations of Western Europe that we know today. The eastern half of the empire, though, survived. Initially stretching from the Balkans to Iraq and from north of the Danube to well south down the Nile, this half lasted through the Dark Ages and the Crusades up to the very dawn of the Renaissance.

Although the inhabitants of this empire thought of themselves as Roman, modern people call them and their empire by a different name: Byzantine. Though now half-forgotten in the West, that empire was Europe's medieval superpower. Byzantine armies blocked Islam from sweeping through the Near East and across Europe. Byzantine scholars preserved the works of classical poets, philosophers, and politicians while the West was collapsing. Along with their Muslim neighbors, the Byzantines kept them safe until the Renaissance. Byzantine missionaries spread Christianity into Eastern Europe and Russia, inventing in passing the Cyrillic alphabet used in those areas to this day and establishing the Orthodoxy that still flourishes there. Byzantine emperors commissioned grand public works that served as a challenge and an inspiration to the architects who would one day build the great Gothic cathedrals.

The Byzantine empire had a unique culture, drawing from classical roots but developing in a very different direction from its predecessor. The foundation of Byzantine law and government were Roman. However, the empire's language was Greek, and it partook of more Eastern cultural traditions. Like the West, it was Christian, but it followed a form of Christianity increasingly different from that practiced in areas that fell into Rome's orbit. It was ultimately its own distinct society, neither a Western medieval kingdom writ large, nor a preserved piece of classical antiquity with a more advanced date on the calendar.

For more than a thousand years, from its adoption as a new capital to its fall to the Ottoman Turks, Constantinople was the undisputed center of it all. It was the leading city of Europe: capital of empire, center of trade, and bastion of Christendom. It was a metropolis of as many as three-quarters of a million souls, decorated with the grandest churches in the world, the

most lavish palace on the continent, and the most formidable fortifications of any city in the world ever.

This supplement describes the city of Constantinople through the Middle Ages. It concentrates on a period book-ended by an era of victories and a moment of defeat. The time frame starts with the reign of Justinian (r. 527-565), which marks the city's high point and a significant step in the transition from its ancient to medieval form. It closes with the Fourth Crusade (more specifically, the siege of 1204), which ended in the catastrophic, if temporary, conquest of the city, and changed the empire from a major power to a feeble domain that could only dream of its illustrious past. Constantinople can serve as the model for an imperial capital in your own fantasy game or, of course, appear in a medieval historical game.

Our entry into Constantinople the Great was made about noon or a little later, and they rang their bells until the very skies shook with the mingling of their sounds.

– Ibn Battuta

MATTERS OF LANGUAGE

The official language of the Byzantine empire was a form of Greek that constitutes a bridge between modern and ancient forms of the language. This supplement transliterates Greek terms into the Roman alphabet, but that does leave some lingering issues. Furthermore, changes in terminology through time can confuse the unprepared.

Pronunciation

In Greek words used in this book, consonants are transliterated as unambiguously as possible. The letter “C” is only used in digraphs such as “ch” rather than in contexts where it might cause confusion between “S” and “K” sounds. “G” is always a hard G, as in “gallon” rather than “giant.”

Stress always goes on one of the last three syllables of a word. It frequently but does not always go as close to the beginning of the word as possible within that constraint. For example, the noble title *sebastos* is stressed on the final syllable (se-bas-**tos**), but several variants on that title are stressed on “se” (for example, pro-to-**se**-bas-tos and pan-hy-per-**se**-bas-tos). The *10th-Century Title Table* (p. 27) lists a number of examples.

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Didn't Catch the Name

The word "Byzantine" in reference to the medieval, Orthodox, and officially Greek-speaking phase of the eastern part of the Roman empire was first used by Western scholars in the 16th century, and it didn't come to predominate for some centuries thereafter. A novel name was justified on geographical and cultural grounds, though some champions of "Byzantine" may have had political motives as well. The legacy of the Roman empire was an important prop in Western law and politics, including ecclesiastical politics. Westerners working with Roman law, Western rulers calling themselves emperors, and clergy defending Western religious establishments had to be careful not to attribute too much of the Roman legacy to another culture.

Indeed, because of Westerners' many differences with their eastern cousins, the word Byzantine has taken on distinctly pejorative overtones. It has become synonymous with treachery and baffling complexity, particularly in a bureaucracy or other organization, but that's largely unfair. Though bigger and more complex than Western governments of its time, the Byzantine bureaucracy was smaller than the government of any modern nation of similar size. Likewise, no reason exists to suggest that the Byzantine empire was any crueller than any other major empire, such as that of the Romans or the Chinese, though that may be setting a very low bar.

Despite having a distinct modern label, no clear line divides "Byzantine" from "Roman." Rather, it was a slow transition starting in the third century and lasting until perhaps the sixth. Some scholars draw a line at the seventh and a few even go so far as to refuse to make a distinction and use "Roman," or "east Roman," throughout.

When they needed to indicate nationality, the Byzantines called themselves Romans, which they could justify by continuity of ancient Roman imperial rule. However, they tended to think of themselves first as Christians (or more specifically Orthodox Christians), and anything else a distant second.

Their neighbors to the west usually called them Greeks, since they were Greek-speakers with their capital in Greece and ruling for the most part traditionally culturally Greek regions. Westerners reserved "Roman" for matters in some way connected to the Italian city, though the name "Romania" was occasionally used for the eastern empire.

The empire's other neighbors (Arabs, Turks, Slavs, etc.), being much less concerned with the city of Rome and the legitimacy of Roman law, usually called them Romans (or something derived from "Rome" or "Roman"; the word "Rhum" is common), though some called them Greeks. They were also nearly as likely as the Byzantines themselves to call them Christians, making little distinction between members of the religion and the state that claimed authority over them. The city itself was usually referred to as Constantinople. Even so, some occasionally said Byzantium; Scandinavians called it Miklagarth; the Russians identified it as Tsargrad; and the Turks styled it Stambul or Istanbul.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

This supplement covers topics touched on in some of the biographies in *GURPS Who's Who I* and the *Pyramid* (Volume 2) articles "Constantinople" (June 29, 2001) and "Sailing to Byzantium" (November 2, 2001).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby holds degrees in anthropology and archaeology. His master's thesis was a statistical analysis of late Roman/early Byzantine bronze coin circulation in the eastern Mediterranean, a subject so tedious even he found it slow going. He now works for a company that has grown large enough to require separate parallel bureaucracies to administer large geographical regions. He lives with his pious and virtuous wife, a son who is his likely successor, and several dogs that are ineligible to reach the throne.

About GURPS

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Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

CHAPTER ONE

GEOGRAPHY

"My lord, we're nearly there." Brother Emile's voice woke the napping lord instantly. Between the ache from his healing leg and the lumpy floor of the wagon in which he was traveling, Count Gervais could hardly be said to have been sleeping. Sitting up slowly, he saw that the mist and rain of the early part of the day

How great is that noble and beautiful city! How many wonders there are to be seen in the squares and in the different parts of the city!

– Fulcher of Chartres

had given way to sun and blue skies. He frowned back along the road by which the wagon had come.

"Is this it?" Gervais asked, a trifle indignant. He gestured at the scattered structures around him and back along the road down which the cart had come. "I'll grant that it looks well-made, but this is hardly bigger than Lyons."

"No, lord," Emile gently corrected, pointing. "That way."

Gervais turned toward the direction in which the cart was traveling, craning his neck around until he saw the wall. His eyes widened, and he crossed himself.

The land on which Constantinople was built was itself unremarkable. However, the geopolitical value of the site was tremendous. The city was ideally situated for the capital of an empire: It was built at the passage between two seas, and where continents touch.

BETWEEN MARMARA AND THE GOLDEN HORN

Constantinople occupies the end of a tapering peninsula at the extreme southeastern corner of what is now the European part of Turkey, about 65 miles from the modern border with Greece. The peninsula is on the northern shores of the Sea of Marmara, the body of water between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and where Europe meets Asia Minor. The roughly triangular peninsula has the Sea of Marmara to the south; the Golden Horn, a narrow and winding inlet, to the north; and the rest of Europe to the west. The Bosphorus, a strait connecting the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea (about 19 miles to the north), passes to the east. The Bosphorus is narrow, about two miles wide at Constantinople itself and under 1/2 mile across in some places, so the Asian side is easily visible from the city. The suburb of Galata (also called Pera in some sources) lies across the Golden Horn less than 1/2 mile from the city's east end.

Though the land's productivity and natural resources are nothing special, this position has enormous strategic value. It sits at the heart of the wealthy, densely populated Greek-speaking world. Moreover, it controls land-based trade moving east and west and sea-borne trade moving north and south. Consequently, Constantinople is a focal point for travel and trade between Europe, Russia, and the Near East, and has indirect links to India and China via the Silk Road and sea routes, and to Scandinavia by way of Russia's major rivers.

The climate is in a transitional zone between Mediterranean and temperate regions. Summers are hot and humid, and the temperature occasionally dips below freezing in the

winter, accompanied by snow. However, the climate did vary somewhat through the period in question here. It was a bit warmer in the sixth century, becoming cooler and dryer in the next few centuries.

Earthquakes are frequent in the region. In fact, the fault line between the Anatolian and Eurasian plates passes through the middle of the Sea of Marmara. Over the centuries covered in this supplement, the city experienced several severe earthquakes that destroyed private buildings and seriously damaged many monumental structures.

The land around the city is unremarkable farmland, home to vineyards and fields of grain. The immediate vicinity is mostly low hills, with a few streams and low vegetation, even some stands of trees, but no major rivers. (The land is somewhat hillier to the north and the east.) Beyond the city walls, during the time frame under consideration, settlements and military camps thinned to scattered houses and villages within sight of one another for a considerable distance, including luxurious villas belonging to the city's notables (such as the imperial family) and a great number of monasteries.

Surrounding settlements kept the city well-supplied. The great medieval traveler Ibn Battuta, visiting in the 13th century, identified Constantinople along with its suburbs in Galata as a single vast city divided by a great river. Constantinople was over 60 miles away from the nearest separate city of any size, Nicomedia to the southeast. Although smaller towns were to the west, the nearest large city in that direction was Thessalonica, over 360 miles away.

THE CITY ITSELF

From the late fourth century onward, Constantinople was a stubby, lopsided triangle somewhat larger north to south than east to west, covering around 11 square miles. It was built on a region of low hills and small areas of level fields. A small river – the Lykos – cut through the southwestern corner, though large parts of it were paved over, particularly as it approached the sea.

THE LANDWARD VIEW

Once past any suburbs, the first thing a visitor saw approaching from the landward side was the imposing defensive wall. (During the city's most populated eras, *very* substantial settlements may have developed outside the walls, but their precise extent is unclear.) This structure was a complex set of two walls and cleared areas around them; see *The Wall* (p. 39). The wall stretched over four miles, bulging slightly outward along most of its course and hugging the higher ground as much as possible. It was made from alternating bands of stone and brick, a common Byzantine style of construction that improved its resistance to impact and earthquakes. After the construction of the wall, many writers pointed out that, like Rome, Constantinople contained seven hills. Some were very low to the point of being scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding terrain, but the symbolism was important as part of the effort to frame Constantinople as a second Rome.

Ignoring small, fortified posterns in the outer wall's towers (which were usually kept closed), the wall had nine sets of gates along its length, each protected by drawbridges and pairs of towers at both the inner and outer wall. The southernmost, the Golden Gate, was reserved for important ceremonial use, such as the entrance of the emperor after an absence or the arrival of particularly important foreign dignitaries. For example, the pope, during those rare times when relations between

Rome and Constantinople were friendly, would use it. Most other visitors, though, would have to use a different entrance.

Once inside the city, the visitor might have seen less than he'd expect. The immense area encompassed by the walls ensured that, even at its height, Constantinople would never be as densely populated as most other major cities of the period. In times of prosperity, residents established gardens and scattered homes, while during periods of decline, large patches of territory were left open. Several visitors to Constantinople near the end of the empire remarked that the area enclosed by the walls contained several scattered villages. Nonetheless, even during thriving periods, the west end of the city was typically more open than the east.

The residents of the west end tended to be relatively wealthy, setting up small palaces with substantial patches of land around them. The most notable case was the neighborhood of Blachernae. Located at the northwestern corner of the city, Blachernae was initially outside the Theodosian wall. However, starting in the 11th century, emperors of the Comnenid dynasty moved from the sprawling palace complex established by earlier emperors into a new residence there. Not long thereafter, the course of the city wall was altered, adding a bulge of substantial but relatively inferior fortifications to the northwestern part of the city.

Heading east, the streets from the gates either comprised or eventually led to the forked *Mese* (literally, middle or central), Constantinople's main street. The *Mese* was very wide by medieval standards (about 80') and paved with marble according to some accounts. Long sections of it were flanked with colonnaded porticoes, particularly along the southern branch, which started at the Golden Gate. This branch also had two large markets, the Forum of Arcadius and the Forum of the Ox.

About 2/3 of a mile into the city were the remnants of the old city wall built by Constantine. Although no longer a significant fortification by the time of Justinian, the Constantinian wall traditionally marked the beginning of much denser occupation. This part of the city was mostly lower and middle class. However, a scattering of wealthier homes and the significant churches and monasteries they supported clustered around the *Mese* and the Aqueduct of Valens. The *Mese* was lined with an unbroken series of porticoes and shops for the rest of its length. On a hill overlooking the *Mese*'s northern branch sat the Church of the Holy Apostles, Constantinople's second-most important place of worship; it was home to both important relics (see *Relics*, p. 24) and the tombs of most emperors up to the 11th century.

The branches of the *Mese* joined not far before the Forum of Theodosius. This area was typical of the city's important public spaces. It was surrounded by two-story colonnades and lavishly decorated with statuary. The forum contained a monument to Theodosius I that was something between a column and a very narrow tower. Decorated with carvings spiraling up its length, the 120' pillar had an internal staircase leading all the way to the top. It once held a statue of the emperor, though it fell down a few decades after Theodosius' death and was replaced by a simple cross.

A few hundred yards past the Forum of Theodosius, the *Mese* crossed the *Makros Embolos* ("Great Portico"), a major street running from north to south from one shore to the other.

Population

For various reasons, the population of Constantinople varied by more than an order of magnitude over its existence. This table indicates the approximate population at various dates through the city's lifetime.

Year	Population
530	500,000 to 750,000
700	70,000
1050	375,000
1200	450,000
1453	30,000

The city's population mirrored the fortunes of the empire as a whole. The city's height in the 530s reflected the empire's reach across the Mediterranean, while its fall into the eighth century mirrored the empire's near-total collapse during that period due to invasion and plague. The empire's revival under the Macedonian dynasty set the capital to expanding again, but the trend reached an end on the eve of the Fourth Crusade, leading to another collapse and a twilight age that lasted until the Ottoman conquest.

Adventure Seed: Plugging the Holes

As formidable as it clearly was, the wall still had a few weaknesses. For example, the rebuilt walls on the northern end weren't as thick as those farther south, and the relatively steep slope of the land it sat on made it difficult to establish a moat. More subtle ways also could be found to get into the city, specifically, the various aqueduct pipes providing the city with its water. An army couldn't get through them, but some were big enough to insert a few chosen people. (In 705, the deposed Justinian II did just that, entering the city with a small strike force and driving off his successor.) Over generations, aqueducts came in and out of use, and older ones could be forgotten.

A cautious bureaucracy engages the PCs to perform a survey of the walls to locate and report on possible weaknesses, notably forgotten or hidden passages. (If no PCs are qualified to do any actual surveying, then part of the job becomes to find people who are and closely supervise them.) They will have to deal with uncomfortable working conditions doing close physical inspections of wall foundations on slopes or partly flooded sections of ditch, figure out how to find hidden passages, and deal with angry homeowners who have built structures up against the inner wall. If they actually find anything, they may have to deal with angry smugglers, spy rings, or even creatures from the underworld whose tunnels connect to old passages in the walls.

Like the Mese, the Makros Embolos was colonnaded and well-paved. It was home to a number of important mercantile concerns. The intersection was decorated with a *tetrapylon* (a set of four ornamental columns, one at each corner).

A few hundred yards farther on was the circular Forum of Constantine, located just outside the line of Byzantium's original walls. Like the Forum of Theodosius, colonnades surrounded it. It also had ceremonial gates at the east and west and a commemorative column in the center.

In the eastern end of the city, the Mese ended at the heart of the city and the empire. The road formally stopped at the Augustaion, a lavishly decorated public square. It was surrounded by the Hagia Sophia, the empire's greatest church; the Hippodrome, the city's most important public space; and the imperial palace. (See *Notable Locations*, pp. 39-40, for more detailed descriptions of all three.) In addition to the core buildings of the church and government, the east end of the city also featured several important industrial centers, a number of other large churches and, on the slopes of the eastern shore, a great many small monasteries.

THE SEAWARD VIEW

The visitor coming in from the sea got a different view. Constantinople had defensive walls extending around the seaward sides of the city, which, though nowhere near as strong as the landward wall, were certainly strong enough for most purposes. The gentle slope of the land meant that the shore had many patches of marshy ground. Several of the harbor districts were created by walling off swampy areas of shoreline and either dredging them to provide harborage or selectively filling them in to create level ground sheltering deeper areas. The more active harbors on the Golden Horn were closer to the east end than the west, so new visitors who landed at Constantinople proper (rather than at Galata, as some might) could head south to the spectacle of the palace district. By the ninth century, in addition to port facilities, the north shore of the city was home to small colonies of foreign merchants, especially to the east of the Makros Embolos. These included groups of merchants from Amalfi, Pisa, and Venice, with merchants from Syria and Genoa granted colonies there later. The Genoese were eventually ceded a large neighborhood in Galata, which they fortified in the 14th century. This area was probably also

home to most of the city's Jewish population; see *Other Religions*, pp. 23-24.

Although the city was surrounded on two of its three sides by water and it was in a region with direct access to two major seas, not everywhere was appropriate for landing. The current coming out of the Bosphorus was swift, and the sea around the south of the city was choppy in many places. A few landings were along the southern shore (notably one attached to the imperial palace), but most of the city's harbors were to the north, facing the calm waters of the Golden Horn. In times of war, the mouth of the Golden Horn was protected by a heavy chain supported by wooden floats running between towers on the shore of either side, preventing ships from entering.

THE INSIDE VIEW

Though the city's public face was very carefully constructed, the back areas developed in a less controlled way. Through the city's history, some attempts were made at the construction of a square street grid. However, the city's topography and, probably more importantly, its long history of growth and contraction caused it to drift from that pattern into a more organic layout. This was particularly the case in the typically more sparsely populated western part of the city. Though the grand ceremonial avenues were broad, paved, and lavishly decorated (mostly the Mese and some major streets leading off of it), the back alleys in poorer neighborhoods were probably made of dirt and could be very narrow, as little as two or three yards across. This was particularly the case during the city's most densely populated eras, around the reign of Justinian and in the century or two leading up to the Crusades. In a particularly built-up neighborhood, where buildings were more than a story or two tall, there might be streets in near-perpetual shadow. Some back streets were stepped, carved into the rock of the low hillsides.

Many shops and other business concerns were located along the broader streets and on the lower stories of buildings along the side streets. Retail stores were likely small affairs, single-room alcoves on the ground floor facing the streets. Granaries, bakers, and other sources of staple foods appear to have been concentrated in the center of the city between the Constantinian wall and the monumental east end. Merchants would have been more drawn to the areas along the shore; warehouses were naturally located as close as possible to harbors.



MAP OF CONSTANTINOPLE (CIRCA 1150)

Key

- | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. Forum of Arcadius | 3. Holy Apostles Church | 5. Forum of Constantine | 7. Augustaion | 9. Hagia Sophia |
| 2. Forum of the Ox | 4. Forum of Theodosius | 6. Basilica Cistern | 8. Hippodrome | |

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY

"That one?" Gervais asked. Emile exchanged some words with the guide, sent along with them by the abbot of the monastery where they had been assigned lodgings.

"The emperor Justinian, my lord."

"And that?"

"The emperor Constantine."

"That doesn't look any thing like . . ."

"A **different** emperor Constantine, my lord. This is the first one."

"And . . . stop!" Gervais gestured impatiently to the litter bearers. They knew no French, and he an equal amount of Greek, but they made sense of his vigorous signs. "Who in the name of Christ are they?"

"Goddesses of the pagans, my lord."

Gervais stared at the statues, amazed. "They look like they could come off their pedestals and walk away."

"I doubt that, my lord," Emile sniffed. Nevertheless, Gervais could tell how tightly the priest was clutching his crucifix.

The history of Constantinople is, in many ways, the history of the empire. Being the chief and by far the largest and most important city of the empire, most of what made the empire go happened in Constantinople. As the empire grew and prospered, the population of the city expanded and its wealthy and powerful paid to remake the city in whatever way pleased them. As the empire shrank and grew poorer, so did its capital.

FOUNDATION

The city that would become Constantinople was founded in the seventh century B.C. in what would later become the expanded city's extreme eastern end. It was a colony established by Megara in Attica. According to legend, the leader of the colonization effort was a man named Byzas, from whom the city took the name *Byzantion*, later Latinized to Byzantium. Though the site's natural advantages were as obvious to its founders as to anyone else and it became reasonably wealthy, it was never a leading city either in its own right or when it became a Roman possession, probably during the first century A.D.

*With His Army and Just
Force, He Has Saved the
Republic From Tyranny and
All Its Factions.*

– *Inscription to
Constantine I*

By the end of the third century A.D., the Roman empire was struggling under a tremendous burden of barbarian invasion, agricultural collapse, debased currency, and an endless string of rebellious generals with ambitions for the throne. In order to reestablish firm control, the emperor Diocletian put into place a series of administrative reforms. In a typically conservative

Roman fashion, where very little was ever actually done away with, he essentially duplicated the existing government. The empire was divided in two, with the split in Europe in the vicinity of modern Yugoslavia and Bosnia, and the split in Africa running through the middle of modern Libya. Each half had its own emperor, who was supposed to operate in conjunction with his counterpart but focus on his own area, allowing him to give full attention to a smaller region than that which had preoccupied earlier emperors. Each emperor (an *augustus*) was to nominate a "junior" emperor (a *caesar*) as well, to set up a clear line of succession, and avoid the devastating wars that often followed the death of a ruler.

Unsurprisingly, this system didn't work as well as intended. Revolts and succession wars continued, and periods still occurred with sole emperors. However, it did establish the precedent for a division of parallel administrations in east and west, and it detached the administration of the empire from the city of Rome. It was the need to set up an eastern headquarters that led the emperor Constantine to establish himself in Byzantium in 324. He instituted a massive building program to enlarge and improve the city. He commissioned the construction of a new wall that more than doubled the city's area. He also had a variety of lavishly decorated public buildings (including Christian churches) erected. On May 11, 330, the city was formally consecrated with its new name: Constantinople.

The rebuilt city quickly accumulated many of the official trappings of Rome. It had a native senate (composed of aristocrats selected by Constantine, making them more compliant than Rome's own), a similar number of administrative divisions, and a large-scale grain dole. In the ceremonial square (the Augustaion), a new *milion* was established, a central marker from which road distances would be measured in the eastern half of the empire.

While the West declined through the next few centuries, the eastern capital became larger and more important. A network of canals and aqueducts, probably the largest public works project in Europe up to that point, was constructed to bring much-needed water in from Thrace, over 60 miles to the west. The emperor Theodosius II built the city's final wall

early in the fifth century, with a number of significant additions around 450. After the reign of the fiscally talented emperor Anastasius early in the sixth century, the imperial treasury was filled with immense sums of money, paving the way for the reign of Justinian and the golden age of the Byzantine empire.

Constantinople (537 A.D.)

Population: 750,000 (Search +3)

Physical and Magical Environment

Terrain: Plains

Appearance: Very Beautiful (+4) **Hygiene:** -1

No Mana (No Enchantment)



Culture and Economy

Language: Greek

Literacy: Accented

TL: 3

Wealth: Comfortable (x2)

Status: -1 to 8

Political Environment

Government: Dictatorship, Municipality

CR: 4 (Corruption -1)

Military Resources: \$52.5M

Defense Bonus: +8

Notes

Constantinople is home to a huge number of governmental offices and Orthodox churches and monasteries (+3 to search rolls). It's also a significant producer of silk and importer of goods from the Near East and beyond (+2 to search rolls), and preserves significant numbers of classical texts (+1 to search rolls).

At its height, the city inside the Constantinian wall is densely packed with people and buildings, and even the area between the Constantinian and Theodosian walls is reasonably well-populated with monasteries, churches, shops, and homes lining the major streets. In poorer neighborhoods, the skyline is crowded with tall apartment buildings. Though things have begun to change, there are still many aspects of classical civic life. Associations of unrelated people such as craft guilds and circus factions are active or at their height, and many public amusements still occur. Because the empire covers large parts of Europe, the Near East and Middle East, and North Africa, visitors to Constantinople are multi-ethnic, but most residents think of themselves as Roman.

GLORY AND COLLAPSE

By 527, Constantinople had obtained several of its lasting features, but hadn't quite taken on its full medieval form. In that year, the emperor Justinian ascended the throne. With the empire prosperous and the borders relatively secure, the empire set about expanding its authority again. The most notable efforts were to the west. At the beginning of Justinian's reign, the empire held its traditional western boundary in the Balkans. After a long series of military campaigns, it recovered the rest of the Adriatic coast, Italy, southern Spain as far north as Cordoba, and most of Northern Africa.

More locally, Justinian was responsible for a great deal of the medieval shape of the city. This is partly because, with the empire's immense wealth and reach, a considerable amount of money could be spent to make further improvements to the city. Moreover, man-made disaster aided Justinian's city-building.

By 532, Justinian was facing unrest because of the high taxes he needed to fund the imperial war machine. Because of this, some sections of the aristocracy were considering ways to replace him with a descendant of one of his predecessors. Against this background, Justinian was about to have two members of popular racing factions (see *Chariot Racing*, p. 38) executed for deaths caused by recent riots. In a nigh-unprecedented maneuver, the racing factions united against him and,

on January 11, revolted at the end of a day of chariot racing, forcing the emperor to flee to the palace. Indeed, the Nika revolt, (so called because of the rebels' rallying cry of "Victory!") nearly drove him from the city. According to tradition, he would have fled the city if not for his wife's scolding.

During a week of rioting, many were killed and much of the city burned. After the rebels appointed as emperor a nephew of Anastasius, Justinian used bribery to split the temporarily allied factions apart. He also called on his general Belisarius, who had been largely responsible for retaking Italy and North Africa, to overwhelm those who remained. Thousands died, the would-be usurper was executed, and Justinian was left with something very much like a blank slate to build on. In addition to considerable private construction during this period, Justinian expanded the palace, excavated a massive new reservoir, and ordered the erection of the third (and still standing) Hagia Sophia.

The reign of Justinian marks the high point of Constantinople's history in terms of wealth, population, power, and artistic activity. Soon thereafter, the city began to decline. The first significant blow was a terrible plague late in Justinian's reign, which may have killed a third of the city's population.

This was just the first of a series of plagues that recurred over the next two centuries. Later plagues were less devastating, but they continued to sap the strength of the empire.

Moreover, politically and militarily, the empire was overextended. Despite an active program of building fortifications, many of the early sixth century conquests were short-lived. Most of the western territories, notably Spain and North Africa, were organized into *exarchates* and remained nominally under Byzantine control but, without a great deal of material support, were essentially abandoned. The Spanish possessions, under pressure from the Spanish Vandal kingdom, were lost by the end of the sixth century. The North African kingdoms, also threatened by Vandals, were ultimately overrun by the Muslim expansion of the late seventh century.

Closer to home, the Byzantine frontier on the Danube was under constant threat from Slavs and Avars (a confederation of nomadic groups from the Balkans through central Asia). The eastern border with the Persians also saw frequent conflict. The emperor Phocas, who gained the throne in 602 by assassinating his predecessor Maurice, immediately became the subject of overthrow attempts himself and actual civil war. The internal conflict led to weakened borders, which in turn led to attacks on every front. The Byzantine policy of diplomacy-by-bribery with occasional resort to warfare (see *Byzantine War and Peace*, pp. 20-21) collapsed thereafter. Persians overran the eastern frontier, taking Egypt, Syria, and large parts of Anatolia. Constantinople was itself attacked in 626 by a joint force of Avars and Persians. The city's placement on important shipping lanes made it relatively easy to attack the city by sea. However, although the defenders were significantly outnumbered, the Theodosian walls proved impregnable. The invaders were driven off with heavy losses, while the emperor Heraclius, who had overthrown Phocas in 610, took advantage of the situation to regain the lost eastern provinces.

The Byzantines had earned some peace, but the respite proved to be a brief one. By 634, Byzantine provinces in the Near East had begun to fall to armies rallying around the new banner of Islam. Heraclius and his immediate successors managed to hold some sort of line in Anatolia, though Arab raids into Byzantine territory became a regular occurrence. Moreover, the Byzantine position in the west deteriorated quickly as resources were drawn away to defend the east. The Byzantines lost Egypt and Syria again, this time for good. Carthage was lost for the last time in 697. Byzantine influence in Italy was reduced to areas around Ravenna, Rome, and Napoli. Meanwhile, Slavic rulers expanded their territory across the Danube and through the Balkan peninsula, eventually taking most of Greece itself.

Constantinople was subject to Arab attacks in 672 to 678, and yet again in 717, though all of these attacks were thoroughly unsuccessful because of Byzantine technological and diplomatic superiority. The heavy walls proved impervious despite the great lengths that had to be defended and the presence of a relatively small defensive force. The use of Greek fire (see *GURPS Low-Tech*, p. 84) forced attackers to keep their ships well away from the seaward walls. (This in turn allowed supplies to reach the city, essentially dooming any siege.) In the siege of 717, a force of Slavic allies attacking the besieging force from the rear further aided the Byzantines. After each siege, the Arabs were forced to retreat after taking very heavy losses. Still, the advantages of the capital itself weren't sufficient to put the empire on the offensive.

During these years, the population of the city plummeted. Partly caused by the plagues, the shrinking and increasingly impoverished empire also no longer needed such a huge governmental apparatus, nor could such a large, concentrated population be maintained. By the early eighth century, the population was perhaps a tenth of what it was under Justinian.

Constantinople (750 A.D.)

Population: 70,000 (Search +2)

Physical and Magical Environment

Terrain: Plains

Appearance: Beautiful (+3) **Hygiene:** -1

No Mana (No Enchantment)

Culture and Economy

Language: Greek **Literacy:** Broken

TL: 3

Wealth: Average (x1) **Status:** -1 to 8

Political Environment

Government: Dictatorship, Municipality

CR: 4 (Corruption -1)

Military Resources: \$2.45M **Defense Bonus:** +8

Notes

In its reduced circumstances, Constantinople only gives an additional +2 to search rolls for governmental offices and +1 for Orthodox religious institutions.

Outside of the ceremonial and governmental core around the palace and the Hagia Sophia, Constantinople looks more like a collection of villages, fields, and freestanding churches and monasteries than a city. Most homes are no more than two stories tall. The remaining churches and monuments appear all the more prominent because of their sparse surroundings. Penniless visitors will have no trouble finding vacant (if possibly dangerously decrepit) buildings to sleep in, either freestanding or on the fringes of occupied areas. Even the palace is in decline, with some sections closed off due to lack of maintenance, and even some sections still in use visibly crumbling. The city's mood is notably more somber than in earlier decades. Much of classical civic life has faded away to be replaced by an internal, domestic focus in most people's lives. However, the Byzantines, though serious and reserved at first, aren't completely glum. A lively discussion on religious topics is easy to start, and large crowds always gather to view notables and relics in procession. A greater gap has developed between natives and foreigners. The shrunken empire is less multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, so a clearer division exists between Greek natives and non-Greek outsiders.

The aqueduct completed under Valens was knocked out of commission during one of the sieges, but the city's need for fresh water had declined with it sufficiently that it was not restored for over a century (until 756). Sizable areas within the walls became uninhabited. Though still a respectable city by the standards of the time, the walls encompassed an area several times bigger than was needed. Large parts of the city reverted to cultivated land and scattered clusters of homes, like small agricultural villages.

The city probably "hollowed out" during the period of decline, maintaining its most important ceremonial areas but emptying out back streets. The most luxurious parts of the city, notably the eastern tip around the palace complex and the major streets, remained relatively well-populated, though vacancies and empty spots could be found there as well. Less accessible areas were a different story. Without ongoing maintenance, most abandoned buildings quickly fell into disrepair and collapsed into rubble, were looted for useful stone and brick, or just burned down. Neighbors reclaimed the vacant land to use as gardens and orchards. Densely populated areas became less so with small cultivated areas springing up. Sparsely populated neighborhoods became isolated houses or clusters of houses surrounded by worked fields. Isolated houses passed away to areas of open parkland. What remained were the administrative and commercial core and a scattering of suburb-like clusters of buildings trailing away to the west.

During this period, many aspects of Byzantine society shifted away from their classical form and into something more medieval. Latin finally died as one of two official languages during the reign of Heraclius, to be completely replaced by Greek. Popular recreations such as public baths and theatrical productions started to drift out of fashion. The focus of people's lives turned inward and to family and close associates, away from an overarching concept of civic life. (The kinds of political involvement outlined in *GURPS Greece* had long since passed away.)

Although the loss of territory slowed in the early eighth century, the domestic situation was about to get worse. Tradition has it that the conflict over *iconoclasm* (see p. 23) started around 726, when the emperor Leo III ordered that an image of Christ that hung over an important entrance to the palace be replaced with a simple cross. That act was followed up a few years later by an official move against icons in general. Whatever incident may have caused the theological debate to emerge into a popular one, it occupied a great deal of the empire's internal energies as iconoclasts (more or less rallying around the imperial family and household) fought with iconophiles (more or less centered around monasteries). This resulted in riots, deaths, the destruction of countless works of art, the dissolution of monasteries on a scale that would not be seen again until the Tudor period in England, and ecumenical councils widely rejected for being rigged in favor of the iconoclast position.

REVIVAL AND CRUSADES

After 50 years, the battle over iconoclasm quieted; it passed from the forefront of the social and political scene, at least for a while. The empire had reached a low point. Only fragments remained of Justinian's conquests in the west, Slavs had taken almost all of the Balkan peninsula, and Arabs had moved significantly into Anatolia. Though weakened from its height, the empire did enjoy a few advantages. The remaining territory was culturally and linguistically more homogenous than Justinian's far-flung empire. With less territory to defend, troops did not have to be sent great distances at similarly great cost. The loss of the eastern and African provinces, strongholds of Monophysite and other heresies, meant that authorities could spend less time maintaining delicate religious compromises.

With these few relative advantages and the lucky appearance of a number of better than average rulers, the empire began to do something quite unusual for an old state: grow. This happened very much by fits and starts – lasting territorial expansion was made in some places while ground was lost in others. For example, in the middle of the ninth century, Basil I regained a great deal of land in the southern Balkans and southern Italy. The Byzantines then lost ground in the Balkans at the end of the ninth century. They recaptured it and more in the late 10th and early 11th centuries, notably under Basil II, who earned the epithet "the Bulgar-killer." Acquisitions in Italy and several islands in the eastern Mediterranean were accompanied by the loss of Sicily to North African Muslims. The eastern border continued to fluctuate and suffer from regular incursions. However, the empire managed to improve internal security to reduce the impact of raiding, and push south as far as Tripoli in Lebanon and east into Armenia and Mesopotamia. Additionally, throughout the period, the city itself was subject to periodic raids by

fast-moving forces, including a Bulgar army in 813 and Rus fleets in 860 and the 940s.

As the empire revived, Constantinople began to grow as well. The population rose back into the hundreds of thousands, old buildings were repaired, and empty spaces were filled in. This period saw extensive revisions to the imperial residence. The palace complex expanded north to encompass the Magnaura, the meeting place of the Byzantine senate. The new throne room was equipped with nigh-legendary automata, including artificial trees filled with singing mechanical birds, a mechanical lion that sat up and roared, and a throne on a rising platform, all believed to be powered by a complex hydraulic mechanism. Even so, the imperial family came to prefer new lodgings at Blachernae (a neighborhood just outside the northern end of the Theodosian wall) not long before the First Crusade.

The good fortune seemed to end in 1071. This year was marked by two military catastrophes from which the empire never fully recovered. In Italy, the remaining Byzantine possessions had been eroding for years, taken over by local Lombard lords and Norman mercenaries who eventually set themselves up in local domains. In that year, the city of Bari, the last Byzantine-ruled city on the peninsula, fell, permanently ending the Byzantine presence in the West. Worse yet, the Byzantines lost a major battle at Manzikert in eastern Anatolia to the Seljuk Turks, and the emperor Romanos IV was himself captured. He was released shortly thereafter, having made a number of concessions. However, he had already made himself unpopular, and was deposed not long after his release. This led to another cycle of civil war; the Turks took advantage of the confusion, expanding into Anatolia over the next 20 years until almost nothing was left to the empire but a number of coastal territories.

The emperor Alexius I, who came to power in 1081, ended internal strife after another bout of civil war. He also halted attempts by Slavs and Normans to move into the Balkans. However, he had insufficient resources to take on the Seljuks. Without enough troops of his own, he looked for allies. After a few years of patient diplomacy, in 1095, he proposed to Pope Urban II that Western nations send troops to help push back the infidel Turks. What he wanted were a few foreign mercenaries. What he got was something very close to another invasion, and possibly the largest conflict of the Middle Ages to boot. Urban turned Alexius' request for assistance into a grand, stirring call to reclaim the Holy Land for Christendom: the Crusades. (*GURPS Crusades* and *GURPS Arabian Nights* cover this era in detail from different viewpoints, and *GURPS Middle Ages 1* briefly addresses what the Crusades looked like from the English perspective.)

By 1096, the baffled Byzantines found swarms of unexpected Westerners moving into the empire. The bureaucracy had to respond quickly to mobilize supplies for the tens of thousands of Crusaders passing through to keep them from looting the countryside, as well as transportation and guides along the imperial roads to move them into hostile territory as quickly as possible.

The Crusaders' lack of strong organization may have worked in Alexius' favor. As each new army reached Constantinople, Alexius welcomed its leader and subjected him to intense personal attention and the full ceremonial power of the Byzantine court. It was enough to get each of the supreme Crusader leaders to agree that any land retaken by the Crusader armies would belong to the empire. With that agreement, the army would be shipped across the Bosphorus and on to Muslim-held Nicaea.

However, the relationship between the Byzantines and the Crusaders was never smooth, and it soon collapsed completely. In 1098, the Crusader armies – united in the victorious siege of Antioch and the subsequent massacre of its inhabitants – broke with the empire due a heated dispute over the question of Byzantine support and participation in the war. Any lands the Crusaders gained, they now would keep for themselves.

Nevertheless, as a great outpost of Christendom commanding important east-west routes, Constantinople became a notable stop along the way for armies heading east to the new Crusader kingdoms and the Muslim lands beyond or west to return home. Almost uniformly stunned by the city's grandeur, Western returnees brought with them ideas preserved or invented by the Byzantines.

Though the Byzantines regained vastly less ground than they would have hoped, the Crusaders' invasion of the Levant took a great deal of pressure off them. With peace restored to some extent, Constantinople continued to grow, reaching a respectable fraction of its size under Justinian.

Constantinople (1100 A.D.)

Population: 400,000 (Search +3)

Physical and Magical Environment

Terrain: Plains

Appearance: Very Beautiful (+4)

Hygiene: -1

No Mana (No Enchantment)

Culture and Economy

Language: Greek

Literacy: Accented

TL: 3

Wealth: Comfortable (x2)

Status: -1 to 8

Political Environment

Government: Dictatorship, Municipality

CR: 4 (Corruption -1)

Military Resources: \$28M

Defense Bonus: +8

Notes

Growing back to close to its height, Constantinople in this period again gives +3 to search rolls to find government offices and Orthodox institutions. It also gives +1 to rolls to find silk, Eastern imports, and classical texts.

The city has regained something of the crowds of the age of Justinian, but their character is somewhat different. Churches and monuments remain the most prominent features of the skyline. The city inside the Constantinian wall is as densely packed with buildings as ever, but they're much lower than in the sixth century. Residents remain focused on their families and spiritual lives, but the city is a much noisier, busier place than during the eight century. Between Crusaders, Scandinavian and Russian merchants, and permanent trading colonies from the Italian city-states, the city has probably never seen so many foreign visitors. This causes occasional tension as natives and foreigners clash over differences in religion and legal perquisites. The Byzantines are nevertheless generally a more cosmopolitan people than anyone visiting their city, more likely to be unawed by the unusual antics of outsiders.

As ever, though, this short period of success and expansion was brought to another tragic end: the Fourth Crusade. By the end of the 12th century, the reigning Angelos dynasty had become involved in a complex conflict over succession. Meanwhile, a largely Frankish army had contracted with the Venetians to carry them to Egypt, which was seen at the time as the center of Muslim power and the key to recovering the Levant. When the Franks had difficulty paying for their passage, they agreed to provide Venice with military support in certain conflicts in which they had become involved. The most important of those was support of one branch of the Angelos dynasty. The deal was sweetened for the Franks by additional promises made by the Venetians' candidate for the throne. Just as the Franks had made commitments to the Venetians they couldn't keep, so Alexius Angelos couldn't keep his obligations to the Franks. In 1204, an angry Frankish army supported by Venetian ships laid siege to a weakened and underdefended Constantinople. After a considerable struggle, they took the city by finding weak spots along the sea walls. They did extensive damage to the city and brought centuries worth of carefully preserved art and other riches with them back to the West. For the first time in over a thousand years, Constantinople itself fell under the domination of foreign rulers.

To the End

The Fourth Crusade shattered the empire. The new rulers of Constantinople, who came to be called the Latin emperors, only controlled the city itself and the lands around the Sea of Marmara. Some Byzantine territory, mostly eastern Greece and the islands of the Aegean, was chopped up and handed over to Venice or to other Western lords who owed at least theoretical allegiance to the emperor in Constantinople. Byzantine despots remained in power in western Greece and parts of Anatolia. The city's new Western lords established Catholic bishops, but they had essentially no effect on the Orthodox faithful.

Still, the Latin empire was by no means secure. The Byzantine successor states all wanted to retake the capital, and the Bulgars were as much a threat to the Latin empire as they had been to the Greek one. Indeed, there was a joint siege of the city by the Bulgars and the Byzantine territory of Nicaea in 1235. Much of the city withered away during this period, with

the increasingly desperate Latin emperors selling any valuable material they could find in order to support their defense.

The Latin empire came to a sudden, unexpected end in 1261. A Nicean general with a small force sent to gather intelligence on the state of Constantinople's defense discovered that it had none. The city's garrison and fleet were away on a campaign. The Nicean troops walked in and, after a brief fight with the Latin emperor's skeleton force, retook the city, restoring it to native rule.

The empire was now just a small, weak remnant of what it had been before. The new Paeologos dynasty got off to a reasonably good start and managed to unite the Nicean and western Greek territories, which had been under separate administrations during the years of Latin rule. It also recovered much of Thrace (the successor state of Trebizond on the southeastern shore of the Black Sea remained independent). Then that territory began to shrink away.

The empire's administration for the final two centuries was heavily Westernized, with feudally tinged regional magnates ruling inherited personal domains rather than appointed governors administering imperial territories. New decoration in buildings was painted fresco rather than expensive mosaic. Imperial coronations were accompanied by ritual displays of glass and fine ceramics because the traditional gold and silver were long gone. The capital's population shrank to a few tens of thousands. Several Byzantine scholars fled to nearby Italy, taking with them a number of texts long-forgotten there and helping to spark the Renaissance (see *GURPS Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence* for some discussion). By the 14th century, the city had become a series of scattered villages occupying a vast walled enclosure. In 1422, the city again came under siege, though the walls held up yet again.

At last, in 1453, the newly installed Ottoman sultan Mehmet II decided to establish a reputation by finally conquering the long-hated Greeks. He laid siege to Constantinople with a huge army and massive cannon (see *GURPS Low-Tech Companion 2*, p. 31 for the armament). Despite an inadequate defense of native troops supplemented by a smattering of foreign mercenaries, the millennium-old walls withstood steady battering by the age's heaviest artillery for two months. By May 29, a large enough breach was opened south of the Gate of Charisius, the northernmost of the nine gates in the Theodosian wall. Mehmet now could send his Janissaries directly into the city. The last emperor, Constantine XI, is believed to have died in the fighting. Many of the city's residents were killed or enslaved. What wealth remained in the city was looted. Constantinople and the Byzantine empire had ceased to be, but the city would go on as an imperial capital under a new name: Istanbul.

Timeline

- Seventh century B.C.** – Byzantium founded.
- 330** – Constantinople officially dedicated.
- 413** – Theodosian walls completed.
- 498** – Anastasius I reforms Byzantine coinage.
- 527** – Justinian becomes emperor.
- 532** – Nika riots.
- 558** – Major earthquake destroys many buildings and damages the wall and the Hagia Sophia.
- 610** – Heraclius becomes emperor.
- 626** – Constantinople attacked by Avars and Persians.
- 672** – Constantinople attacked by Arabs.
- 717** – Another Arab siege; first use of Greek fire.
- 730** – Icons officially forbidden.
- 787** – Second council of Nicaea rehabilitates icons.
- 797** – Irene becomes empress.
- 813** – Bulgar raid on Constantinople.
- 815** – Iconoclasm returns under Leo V.
- 821** – Siege led by former followers of the late Leo V, interrupted by Bulgar attack.
- 842** – Iconoclasm dies out again under Michael III.
- 859** – Major fire damages large parts of the city, including the Hagia Sophia.
- 860** – First Rus raids.
- 897** – Basil I becomes emperor, inaugurating Macedonian dynasty.
- 941** – Second Rus raids.
- 1039** – Major earthquake.
- 1047** – Siege during rebellion against Constantine IX.
- 1054** – “Great Schism” ends communication between Catholic and Orthodox churches.
- 1071** – Catastrophes at Manzikert and Bari.
- 1081** – Alexius I Comnenus becomes emperor.
- 1096** – First Crusade begins.
- 1204** – Fourth Crusade sacks Constantinople.
- 1261** – Nicaeans recover Constantinople.
- 1453** – Constantinople falls to Ottoman Turks.

CHAPTER THREE

THE APPARATUS OF POWER

Gervais thought he had never seen a man more richly dressed, not even when he had attended the royal court, but he understood that the beardless man with the peculiar high voice was not really a nobleman. Indeed, according to Emile, he was hardly a man at all. The beardless man was all smiles, but Gervais had the impression of being treated like a prized but not very well trained animal.

Mikos, whom he understood to be a sort of knight and clerk at the same time, and was also dressed more richly than a king, stood easily next to him. He slipped a small bun from his sleeve and offered it to Gervais, who shook his head. There was something about how the chant from the chamber on the other side of the curtain resounded that made his bones shake and stomach shrink. Mikos shrugged and wolfed it down.

The choral chanting stopped, and he could hear a single voice from the room beyond. Something was about to happen, and Gervais knew it was about to happen to **him**. The beardless man

beckoned them forward. Mikos took Gervais gently by the arm, and the lord, a bit surprised to find himself trembling, limped forward with his cane.

With a flourish, the beardless man whisked the silk curtain aside, and Gervais was dazzled by a sight that could only be heaven.

A city as large as Constantinople couldn't survive without an extensive social and economic infrastructure to support it. Not only did Constantinople have its own governing mechanisms, it was also home to the bulk of the imperial bureaucracy, making governing its primary business. Moreover, when the empire worked well, the imperial administration was supported by a Church that held the hearts and minds of the people; defended by Europe's only standing army of the age; and paid for by a thriving economy.

GOVERNMENT

The Byzantine government started out using Roman forms and mostly Latin terminology. However, it began to shift to something uniquely Byzantine in the years that followed Constantine's establishment of the new capital, culminating in a large-scale reorganization and renaming of officials around the time of Heraclius. That structure would remain in place up to the Fourth Crusade, and parts of it to the end of the empire.

[Alexius] seemed to be a blaze of lightning, such irresistible radiance shone from his face.

– Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*

THE EMPEROR AND HIS HOUSEHOLD

At the top of the list was the emperor himself, the *basileus autokrator* (the Greek title replaced the earlier *augustus*).

The emperor was, at least in theory, something very close to an absolute monarch backed by both ancient legal tradition and divine sanction. Legal scholars noted that, although the emperor's powers did not extend to ordering his subjects to undertake the impossible or the suicidal, his word was otherwise law. Of course, his powers were limited in practice by the ability and willingness of his subjects to obey or enforce his orders. Most Byzantines were typically compliant, but sporadic localized revolts and lesser forms of resistance occurred, notably when it came to interfering with religious doctrine.

Ideally, a new emperor was selected in advance by his predecessor. Following the precedent set by Diocletian, an emperor would often appoint his designated successor as a junior emperor (simply, *basileus*). Succession was not strictly hereditary, but the intended successor was usually a close family member of some kind. If not already related by blood or marriage, adoptions or convenient marriages would often be arranged. There were a number of peaceful successions, but many emperors were forcibly deposed, or their successors pushed aside by other aspirants to the throne. Several generations of residents of Constantinople, if they lived to a reasonably old age, could expect to see at least one assassination, revolt, or other contested succession during their lifetime, sometimes with rebel armies approaching the city.

Although the sitting emperor had broad discretion in appointing his successor, there was a notable restriction: The new emperor had to be a “whole man.” That is, the emperor had to be male and without notable physical defects. Eunuchs were prohibited, for example, as were the blind, the disfigured, and so on. An unsavory consequence of this policy was that rulers who wished to permanently put down rivals often had them mutilated. Deposed emperors and other significant threats to the new ruler might have their noses slit in the middle if they were lucky, or be blinded or have their tongues cut out if they were not. As unpleasant as it may be, such treatment was regarded as more humane than killing the subject outright. Very fortunate rivals might be forced into monasteries or the priesthood, since clergy were likewise disqualified from the throne; very *unfortunate* rivals might be forced into a monastery, *then* mutilated, and *then* murdered, just to be sure.

Nevertheless, even theoretically disqualified candidates for the throne could gain power if they had enough support. Notable examples include the empresses Irene, Zoe, and Theodora (each of whom ruled as sole monarch) and the blinded Isaac II on the eve of the Fourth Crusade, though he was essentially a figurehead. Even those who didn’t or couldn’t become emperors themselves could become a court favorite and rule in all but name.

Figureheads and rulers from behind the throne were quite common because of the power collected around the imperial household. The emperor’s personal wealth and property was often put to official use; the palace itself was an office complex and factory as much as a residence (see *The Palace*, p. 40). Close proximity to the emperor himself was a path to positions of power and influence, so the imperial household was essentially as much a division of government as any official ministry. These are some of the more prominent household officials.

Chartouliarios tou vestiariou: Keeper of the *vestarion*, or imperial wardrobe. Given the importance and enormous luxury of the emperor’s official wardrobe, the *chartouliarios* commanded a vast budget. By the seventh century, the office had

become the head of a substantial part of the treasury, with responsibility for minting coinage. Indeed, during the Crusades, the *vestarion* became essentially *the* treasury.

Koubikouliarios: Personal servant attached to the imperial bedchamber. Generally eunuchs, but empresses would also be served by female *koubikouliaria*.

Parakoimomenos: Initially (in the sixth or seventh century) simply a sort of “on-call” *koubikouliarios*. However, by the ninth century, the office had become the head chamberlain, with day-to-day control over the organization and enormous finances of the imperial household. During the Crusades, this position changed from an office with specific functions reserved for eunuchs to a noble title that could be awarded to anyone.

Praipositos: From the early years of the empire, the head chamberlain, a position similar to the *parakoimomenos* at its height but eventually becoming subordinate to it. As the *parakoimomenos* assumed increased financial functions, the *praipositos* retained control of *koubikouliarioi*.

Protovestarios: Keeper of the private wardrobe. Though of lesser importance than the *chartouliarios tou vestiariou*, the *protovestarios* filled a similar but more private role. The *protovestarios* served as a treasurer of the emperor’s private wealth, as opposed to the public treasury overseen by the *chartouliarios*.

IMPERIAL OFFICIALS

Beyond the imperial household itself, ministers called *logothetes* oversaw much of the work of the government. The closest analogy to *logothetes* in modern governments may be Cabinet-level officials in the United States or similar ministers in parliamentary systems, though more *logothetes* with more specific duties existed than typically found in more modern systems. These ministries included paying soldiers, building fortifications, maintaining waterways, overseeing imperial factories, maintaining tax records, and other functions of government.

One of the most important *logothetes* was the head of the *dromos*, or imperial postal system. Though it sounds un spectacular, the postal system was essentially the empire’s nervous system, providing information to the central organs of government in Constantinople and coordinating commands sent out into the provinces. Consequently, an effective postal system – and therefore, a powerful, capable postmaster – was as important to the empire as an effective army was. The *dromos* held primary responsibility for transporting messages *and* important people within the empire. This extended to messages to foreign heads of state and visits by foreign dignitaries. Thus, the *dromos* also made a significant impact on foreign affairs. The *dromos* was further supported by another department, the *agelon*, which provided it with vital riding animals and beasts of burden. Between the considerable value of the animals it controlled and that of the land it required to feed those animals, the *agelon* was a powerful department in its own right.

However, the foreign affairs role was not exclusive to one department. As was typical in Byzantine government (and many other ancient governments), functions (finance, defense, etc.) that might be collected under one ministry in a political system were instead divided over several officials.

Eunuchs

As in a number of ancient empires, many officials in the imperial household were eunuchs. The Byzantines thought that eunuchs were inherently loyal, and that their condition prevented them from wanting power because they had no descendents to pass things on to. As in other empires, though, eunuchs appear to have been no more loyal than average, and some became effective rulers of the empire, using someone else as a figurehead. Additionally, while eunuchs were typically purchased as slaves in the empire’s earlier days, the career opportunities it provided led some surprisingly prominent families to produce their own eunuchs in order to insert a relative into the imperial household. Despite their reputation for being soft, flighty, and otherwise “feminine,” they nevertheless served in just about every important office in the empire. Eunuchs could be found leading armies or serving as clergy; some even became patriarch.

In the empire, being a eunuch is a -5 point Social Stigma. Though eunuchs are sterile, they do not necessarily have the Sexless quirk. Depending on technical details of their castration, they may be subject to seduction.

Office Hours

Though not necessarily known for their customer service, officials across ancient governments did generally make themselves available to the public. However, administrative assistants and day planners wouldn't be invented for centuries – to say nothing of accurate clocks. Thus, anyone who wants to talk to officials can't just make an appointment or otherwise go through (not yet created) channels designed to guarantee contact between an official and the public. Even orderly queues aren't in regular use. If one does not already have access to officials through personal acquaintances, a few ways exist to deal with that.

One is to attempt to attract the official's attention in person. The petitioners must show up at the official's headquarters (probably a large chamber filled with clerks rather than a secluded private office). Then, they hope that the official has the time and inclination to talk to visitors. Because this is the standard way of contacting officials in many historical societies, adventurers will find themselves part of a crowd in the vestibule of a government building or outside a palace along with other petitioners. Civic judges and similar low-level officials deal with a steady flow of supplicants, so it's simply be a matter of time before it's the PCs' turn. Higher officials, though, typically employ gatekeepers (*GURPS Social Engineering*, p. 48) – sometimes multiple levels of them. In addition to talking their

way around gatekeepers, the visitors may find themselves competing against other petitioners to get themselves heard first.

Another way is by correspondence. People may send letters to officials they wish to influence if they're far away, or deliver requests directly to the official's office if they're in Constantinople itself. See *Social Engineering* (p. 33) for special considerations about using text media. High officials (definitely including the emperor) have gatekeepers for written as well as personal contact.

Finally, a person may ask for help. Patrons, Contacts, and Allies may be able to provide introductions to important officials. Failing that, paid middlemen may be induced to connect someone with people in government he needs to talk to.

Ultimately, solicitants may have to talk their way up the ladder to get what they want. Though it would take time, the best chance to speak with, say, the megas logothetes might be to start with the epi (see *Job Titles*, p. 18) of something trivial, get a referral to a chartouarios from him, and use the chartouarios to introduce them to a logothetes. From there, they must campaign for an introduction to their ultimate target. If the GM adopts the stereotype of the Byzantine government as being composed of feuding social climbers, PCs might manipulate that by forming their own alliances in favor of some officials and against others.

In the case of foreign affairs, the *protasekretis* (the chancellor) also played a major role. While the dromos delivered messages, the *protasekretis* and his ministry was largely responsible for composing them; they might be regarded as a combination secretarial pool and department of consulting lawyers. This made it another of the government's most important departments.

A similar split of functions was found in the treasury. Rather than having a single treasury department, some treasury functions were invested in household offices (see p. 16). Others were invested in the several logothetes of the *genikon*, a ministry that concerned itself with a number of tasks related to collecting taxes and duties, and running mines.

Though not formally organized into a cabinet or similar organization, the various logothetes were at least partially under the supervision of the *sakellarios*, a comptroller whose responsibilities included performing economic surveys and auditing other departments. The *sakellarios* was, at various times, superior or subordinate to the *chartouarios* or *vestiariou* (p. 16). Alexius I made more formal arrangements, appointing a *logothetes ton sekretou* to oversee all other logothetes. This position was later renamed *megas logothetes*, or "grand logothete"; "prime minister" is a reasonable equivalent.

Under the executive control of the logothetes, more-specific functions within a ministry were overseen by a *chartouarios*, who in turn commanded a variety of clerks and officials with supporting duties. (An individual clerk or secretary was a *grammatikos*.) Large departments – such as the *genikon* of the 10th century – might have a *megas chartouarios* as a sort of chief of staff.

CIVIC OFFICIALS

Most of the empire's offices and organizations, though both powerful and based *in* Constantinople, had little direct power *over* Constantinople. While they were largely administrative figures rather than rulers, the city did have its own purely local government machinery.

In addition to the emperor, one of the institutions that survived from the Roman period was Constantinople's own senate. It had as many as 2,000 members in the early days of Constantinople, with a structure similar to the Roman senate (see *GURPS Imperial Rome*). Those numbers declined over time, particularly after the plagues of the sixth century, and it was powerless by the seventh century. Despite having no legislative function (it could only pass symbolic resolutions and confirm nominees for civic offices), it served as a distinction for aristocrats, a body of more-or-less qualified civilians ready to serve various governmental functions, and a springboard for higher offices.

An official called the *eparchos* oversaw the day-to-day administration of the city and its immediate surroundings. He was responsible for overseeing guilds, nominally presided over the Senate, regulated trade, managed public grain supplies, enforced law and order, and supervised a number of lesser officials. Some of those that the *eparchos* oversaw were:

Boullotes: Goods inspector.

Elaioparochos: Customs officer.

Geitoniarches: Subadministrators responsible for specific districts of Constantinople.

Krites: Civic judge; the eparchos was himself the senior magistrate.

Koiaistor: A guardian of public morality.

Legatarios: Overseer of resident merchants. (The legatarios must periodically approve long-term residence by foreigners in Constantinople, so his office may be particularly important to visiting PCs.)

Logothetes tou praitoriou: A sort of prison warden.

Meteres: Keeper of weights and measures.

Praitor ton demon: A combination police chief and fire marshal.

Symponos: Overseer of guild activities.

Contacting a civic official is often like getting in touch with an imperial official – show up outside his office and wait. However, some of these officials (notably police, and goods and customs officers) actively seek out and investigate those who fall into their purview.

Job Titles

Many officials had titles involving the word *epi* (literally, “for”). In the context of offices, it means something like “the person in charge of.” For example, the *epi ton deeseon* was a middle-ranked functionary who handled petitions on behalf of the emperor. Similarly, the *epi tou kanikleiou* was a senior clerk, nominally in charge of the emperor’s inkstand and its specially restricted red ink but also a significant player in the drafting of imperial documents.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The inevitable companion to life in a large city, which offers the anonymity of crowds, is petty (and not so petty) crime. At night, the streets of Constantinople were dark, mostly deserted, and notoriously unsafe. Thieves and the desperate poor lurked in the shadows, waiting to rob the unwary. Late-night pedestrians were well-advised to travel in groups and carrying light. Naturally, the city required law enforcement.

When they weren’t in the field, Constantinople’s infantry garrisons acted as beat cops and were available to put down large civil disturbances. The praitor ton demon also commanded the *kerketon*, a force of no more than a few tens of men. Likely just glorified watchmen, it’s possible that they constituted a more specialized, professional police force.

Once apprehended, accused criminals might be held temporarily in the city’s prison before being taken before a judge to hear their case. Judicial tribunals were sometimes called to decide cases of official corruption, but jury trials were not in use. Since judges were political appointees, many had only sketchy legal training and employed *symponoi* (or legal experts) to advise them. For those found guilty, long-term imprisonment was rarely a practical penalty or, indeed, regarded as much of a penalty at all; incarceration was a safeguard for others rather than punishment for a crime. Rather,

punishments typically consisted of one or more of fines, corporal punishment, and the same kinds of mutilation found in imperial politics (see p. 16). Given the Byzantine aversion to killing, capital punishment was rarely used. A few emperors even boasted of having no executions during their reigns.

CHURCH AND STATE

In a devoutly religious society like the Byzantine empire, naturally interaction happened between the religious and civil hierarchies (see *The Church*, pp. 21-24), and the government was justified at least partly in theological terms. Once Constantine decided to protect Christianity, Christian scholars put the emperor into a scheme where he was the viceroy of God, whose authority on earth mirrored God’s over the universe. The Byzantine empire followed a doctrine that has come to be called *caesaropapism*. The emperor was held to be highest temporal authority, and could not be overruled or deposed by the clergy. (The Catholic West tended toward the opposite position, *papocaesarism*, though not without numerous conflicts and exceptions.) The emperor also could call ecumenical councils to resolve doctrinal issues.

The emperor’s power as a Christian ruler even extended internationally. The rulers of Persia regarded the emperor as the sovereign of any Christians in their territory. Thus, their treatment was subject to treaty negotiations with the Byzantines.

However, the emperor was not himself a priest. Though he could attempt to influence doctrine and activities of the Church, he could not dictate them. This did not stop the emperors from trying. Iconoclasm, forceful deposition of patriarchs, stacking ecumenical councils in favor of particular theological positions, and so on were all attempted, but most ultimately failed. Even in the face of the final Turkish onslaught, the people of Constantinople rejected attempts negotiated by the emperor to move toward Catholic doctrine in return for Western aid. “Better a Turkish turban,” one determined Orthodox said, “than a papal tiara.”

The Provinces

All of the offices and ministries detailed here are either based in or directly concerned with the administration of Constantinople. Day-to-day administration of outlying regions was on a different basis. Up to the seventh century, the empire was divided into a large number of *provinces*, organized into a smaller number of *prefectures*. In this system, military and civil authorities were kept separate, with each region having its own generals for local troops and governors for civil affairs.

The distinction became blurred by Justinian’s establishment of exarchates, which blended civil and military authority. In the seventh century, the empire started to be reorganized into *themes*, in which a local *strategos* become responsible for both civil and military affairs. In time, this system began to devolve again into one splitting civil and military authority. Though not directly important to life in the capital, the thematic armies were a source for troops recruited by elite units stationed in the capital. Additionally, an up-and-coming figure in the administration might spend some time governing a more remote area.

Nevertheless, the relationship between civil and religious authorities was usually at least a functional one and often quite amicable. The head of the Church, the patriarch, was typically a close advisor to the emperor. Some patriarchs assumed responsibility for educating the emperor's children. A few served as regent in Constantinople for emperors in the

field during wartime. Churchmen were also used as agents of diplomacy. Missionaries were among the most determined to reach their intended destinations by whatever means available. As holy men, even if peculiar foreign ones, they were generally regarded as respectable, so they made good letter-carriers or spokesmen for the empire.

THE MILITARY

Surrounded by potential enemies, the empire naturally maintained powerful defenses. The empire's first impulse was to use diplomacy, which included bribery on a massive scale, wherever possible. When diplomacy didn't work, armies were pressed into service.

TROOPS

At least into the seventh century, the bulk of the army's manpower was provided theoretically by *limitanei*. Peasant soldiers, they were granted a plot of land sufficient to support them and necessary expenses for military service. These land grants were both hereditary and inalienable (that is, they could not be sold). To the extent that these restrictions were enforced, this prevented wealthy rural landlords from accumulating vast estates (for example, by granting loans to peasants and taking their land if they could not repay them). It also ensured that the empire would have a reservoir of armed men to draw on in wartime.

However, despite outnumbering regular troops by two to one, the *limitanei* constituted little more than a permanent part-time militia, suitable for defending territory they knew well but not available for long campaigns and not particularly good on offense. As time passed, their land tenures were allowed to erode; their importance declined in favor of increased spending on more-mobile professional troops. Given the great territorial fluctuations of the age, a permanent resident militia would have been difficult to maintain anyway.

Two types of troops carried out the bulk of serious fighting: *thematic* armies and the elite regiments (*tagma*) of the capital. Each theme maintained a small body of professional troops, either indigenous soldiers or mercenaries. The best of the thematic troops and highly skilled mercenaries were recruited for the imperial *tagma* mostly clustered in and around Constantinople, often serving as bodyguard units for the emperor.

There were several notable *tagma*, appearing from the early years of the empire to the 10th century: the *Candidati*, the *Excubitors* (among the oldest units in the capital), the *Hicanati*, the *Immortals*, the *Optimates* (downgraded to an infantry unit after Heraclius), the *Scholae*, and the *Varangian Guard*. The empire generally classified them as cavalry units.

Though some of them went through periods of being largely ceremonial troops who served for political advantage, most were made up of skilled and versatile troops who could fight mounted or on foot. Their exact strength was ill-defined and varied considerably through time. Estimates range from 500 to 6,000 men each, with more recent estimates trending toward the low end.

The number of troops in Constantinople likewise fluctuated over time. Generally, when not in the field, the *tagma* were located in garrisons within a few miles of city. Only a fraction was stationed in the city proper. Some had barracks in the palace, while others were stationed in buildings around the city or in temporary camps between the Theodosian and Constantinian walls.

Most of the *tagma* were commanded by an officer called a *domestikos*. Of those, the commander of the *Scholae* rose to particular prominence. (His title translates as the distinctly unimilitary-sounding "domestic of schools"). In the ninth century, he became a supreme commander of military forces. The position was later renamed the *megas domestikos* ("great domestic"), and later still, split into two domestics, each covering half of the empire.

The *tagma* were a mix of native and foreign troops. The *Excubitors*, for example, started out as predominantly German, though they became largely native by the time of Justinian. The most famous foreign unit was the *Varangian Guard*. Late in the 10th century, emperors distrustful of native troops started hiring Scandinavian mercenaries to serve as bodyguards. They were joined by other northern Europeans, notably Danes and Anglo-Saxons. They had a reputation for being loyal to the throne and exceptionally dangerous on the battlefield. A career as a *Varangian* could be very lucrative, so the position attracted no end of eager recruits. (See *GURPS Russia* and *GURPS Vikings* for more about the Scandinavians and their Russian cousins from whom the *Varangians* were first drawn, and *GURPS Middle Ages 1* for their English successors.)

Mercenaries

Hiring foreigners for important positions was a common trick through history. Without a local power base, foreign-born troops and officials would have no backing if they attempted to revolt; excellent pay helped keep them loyal.

In addition to the prestigious cavalry *tagma*, Constantinople also had several infantry garrison units: the *Numera*, the *Walls*, and eventually the *Optimates*. Each probably had around 2,000 troops each. They were responsible for day-to-day monitoring of the walls and gates, which were also protected by siege engines. The Byzantines used a full range of stone- and bolt-throwing artillery operated by auxiliary units, from crossbow-like scorpions descended from Roman designs to counterweight-operated trebuchets, which were in use possibly as early as the sixth century.

Although maritime themes maintained some military vessels, Constantinople was home to by far the largest part of the imperial fleet. While numbers fluctuated through time and depending on the interests of the emperor of the moment, it had up to 100 galleys. (See *GURPS Low-Tech Companion 2*, p. 34, for more on the Byzantine place in naval warfare.) However, for many periods, this seems to have been less strength than the empire needed, so the Byzantines employed mercenary vessels and the navies of client states, particularly the Venetians.

Through this period, imperial armies had an elaborate command structure. Though it varied in details over time, the system as it stood in the ninth century is representative. The largest stable unit was a *thema* of around 4,000 men, under the authority of a *patrikos*. (“Thema” was probably used originally to mean a military unit and later became associated with its underlying administrative district.) These were divided into two *turmai* of 2,000 men each under a *tourmarchos*. These were in turn divided into two *drouggoi* (each under a *chiliarchos*) of 1,000 men, which were composed of 5 *banda* (200 men) under a *komes*. These were further subdivided into smaller groups of 100 men (under a *kentarchos*), 50 (under a *pentakontarchos*), 10 (under a *dekarchos*), and five (under a *pentarchos*).

Many units varied from the ideal, and quite possibly on purpose: One bit of advice given in a Byzantine military strategy manual was to vary the number of men between units so that enemies couldn’t accurately estimate the size of one’s force simply by counting unit standards.

ARMS AND ARMOR

The Byzantines put a much greater reliance on cavalry (particularly heavy cavalry) and bows than their Roman predecessors did. Indeed, Byzantine cavalry doubled as shock troops and mounted archers. A well-equipped cavalryman wore a helmet and a long mail or scale armor shirt reaching at least to the knee. He also carried a small shield. He was armed with lance, sword (often a single-edged saber), and bow (probably recurved or otherwise adapted to use on horseback). However, only a minority had such equipment, and they were destined to be in the front ranks of any charge. Lighter cavalry made do with leather or quilted jackets and javelins. Likewise, a minority of horses equipped to lead charges wore a bit of frontal armor and had solid plates on their hooves to protect from caltrops. Most horses were unarmored for greater speed.

A similar split appeared in infantry. A well-equipped, front-rank footman might have a helmet, long mail shirt, greaves, a tall shield, long spear, and sword, possibly with an axe or mace

instead of or in addition to the blade. The great majority, who made up the ranks farther back, had much lighter armor (cloth caps, leather or quilted coats). Many had long spears similar to those in the front ranks or possibly resembling pikes, while others had missile weapons: slings, javelins, or bows similar to those used by the cavalry.

The following equivalents can be used to represent Byzantine arms and armor.

Weapon	GURPS Equivalent
Cavalry sword	Thrusting broadsword
Cavalry bow	Reflex bow (<i>Low-Tech</i> , p. 76)
Quilted coats	Cloth armor
Infantry helmet	Typically a pot-helm, but any other helmet is possible
Tall infantry shield	Large shield
Greaves	Any shin armor (<i>Low-Tech</i> , p. 100)

Other items are as listed in the *Basic Set* and *Low-Tech*. For example, the long spear used by the infantry is the long spear on *Low-Tech* (p. 69).

Although the general types of arms and armor remained fairly consistent for Byzantine troops through this period, the empire’s typically declining wealth during the last few centuries before the Fourth Crusade meant that lighter infantry became much more common and the quality of gear was much lower among thematic troops. The tagmatic units, meanwhile, were consistently well-equipped. They tended to be heavily armed, and most were particularly feared for their use of maces. Foreigners, both mercenary units and those recruited into tagmatic forces, often fought with their own native weapons, and some units had their own distinctive gear. For example, the Varangians were noted for using long axes and *rhomphaia*, a long-bladed polearm resembling a naginata (p. B272).

BYZANTINE WAR AND PEACE

The Byzantine attitude toward warfare was ambivalent relative to that of some of its neighbors. On one hand, the Byzantines acknowledged the emperor’s duty to defend the empire and Christianity. They respected military prowess – even expected it from their rulers. On the other, they were sensitive to the economic and human costs of warfare, and had trouble reconciling warfare with religious dictates against killing and in favor of peace. Unlike the Catholics to the west (who invented Crusades) and the Muslims to the east (who had militarized aspects of jihad), the Byzantines did not have holy war as such. Though the Byzantines had no fondness for infidels and generally believed God was on their side, religion alone was never sufficient reason to declare war.

When the Greeks saw them retreating . . . they mounted the walls and let down their clouts and showed them their backsides.

– Robert of Clari, *The Contest of Constantinople*

Consequently, the Byzantine approach to war was to fight when they had to, but use other tactics to gain peace wherever possible. They relied on alliances with more warlike nations (whose allegiance was often purchased), foreign mercenaries, and even directly buying off enemies. To the Byzantine mind, a purchased peace was still peace, and the notion of “millions for defense, not a penny for tribute” would have struck them as short-sighted, leading to greater bloodshed.

At least during the early years of the empire, this attitude may have made the empire more patient and more inclined to master defensive warfare. The borders, for example, were not particularly strongly defended; there were no long walls such as the Romans had built along the Danube or the Scottish border. Rather, a network of small forts distributed across the countryside protected the frontiers. They could shelter the population in the short term, and they housed limitanei and thematic troops who were very good at small-unit tactics and guerilla warfare. Rather than seek out climactic battles, the Byzantines followed a “rope-a-dope” strategy, absorbing small losses, denying the enemy access to supplies, and letting attackers wear themselves out until Byzantine reinforcements arrived or a diplomatic settlement could be reached.

The grand strategy shifted in later years. After the reigns of more aggressive emperors such as Basil I and Basil II, it was on a more offensive footing, with fewer reserves of defensive

Using *GURPS* Mass Combat

Byzantine troops cover a wide range of types with similarly varying equipment and troop quality. Limitanei are levies, consisting of mostly Light Infantry, but they may have a few Bowmen and even Medium Infantry. Their equipment is typically Basic and their quality Average; however, experienced border limitanei can be of higher quality.

Most infantry are a mix of Heavy Infantry (for the front line troops), Medium Infantry, and Bowmen; a few Pikemen might be included as well. Their equipment is Basic to Good (typically declining thorough time) and their quality Average to Good.

Though the Byzantines employ some Light Cavalry, their horse troops are overwhelmingly Medium Cavalry. Thematic and other regional forces have Basic to Good equipment (or Fine in a few cases) and are Average to Good quality, while the tagmatic forces have Fine to Very Fine equipment and are at least Good quality and typically Elite.

The Byzantines had a range of artillery (both Light Artillery and Heavy Artillery) of Average or better quality and with Good or better equipment. Byzantine ships are galleys of various sizes of Average to Good quality with Good or Fine equipment. Land units equipped with Greek fire are Heavy Artillery with Very Fine equipment. Naval units with Greek fire likewise have Very Fine equipment.

troops and larger mobile armies (mercenaries, professional troops associated with administrative districts or, as the Crusades progressed, soldiers personally loyal to important aristocrats). This also meant that, in times of war, when troops were massed for attack on one front, other regions, even the capital itself, were ill-prepared for an attack from another angle.

THE CHURCH

It is hard to overstate the place of religion in Byzantine life. Though the empire was not a theocracy, religious thought and terminology permeated government and everyday life, and the people set their lives' expectations in terms of reaching heaven. Indeed, in several periods, a general conviction that the end of the world was at hand made preparation for eternity doubly important.

Orthodox Christianity can be confusing to many Westerners, perhaps because it combines familiar aspects of Western Christianity with some that seem to select from across sectarian divisions and others that are unique to Orthodoxy. For example, Orthodox buildings have something of the deliberate grandeur of Roman Catholicism, but the Church shares a similarity to some Protestant denominations in functioning with less central direction. Above all, the history of Orthodoxy is filled with vehement, even violent, arguments over points of theology that can seem utterly obscure to outsiders, but that did a great deal to shape the history and culture of the empire.

HISTORY

By the time of Diocletian, a sizable community of Christians lived across the Roman empire, but the early Church as a body was fragmented. Local congregations might be reasonably

well-organized, with a bishop overseeing a number of nearby clergy with their parishes. However, at a “national” level, uneven communication and vigorous discussion occurred rather than hierarchy and order. Doctrinal disputes were rife, and any number of local practices in one area were at variance with those elsewhere. The organization of the early Church was made all the more difficult by the fact that the practice of Christianity was illegal. Periodic rounds of persecution could subject Christians with penalties up to and including death.

By the end of the third century, the size and power of the Christian community had become such that officials became disinclined to continue with persecutions. Constantine (with his co-emperor) issued the Edict of Milan in 313, putting an end to criminal penalties for being a Christian. Constantine himself made a number of friendly gestures toward the religion, including building Christian places of worship and adopting Christian symbols.

What the empire sought now was order. Between the decriminalization of Christianity and official sponsorship of important councils, a widespread organization of Christian parishes and doctrine started to solidify. The first ecumenical council, convened by the emperor at Nicaea in 325, is generally recognized as being the foremost large-scale attempt to assemble consensus on doctrine across Christendom.

Among other resolutions, it produced the first version of the Nicene creed (a fundamental statement on what characterizes Christianity), established a formula for calculating the date of Easter, and made a definitive statement on the nature of Christ. Despite the pronouncements of the council, whether Christ was solely divine, solely human even if specially inspired and gifted, or a combination of the human and divine was to prove a contentious issue within the Orthodox world for centuries thereafter.

Later councils and decisions reached by less formal processes continued to refine and shape doctrine and organization. By the fifth century, most churches came into general agreement on the contents of the Bible, though some regional differences persisted. The primacy of several bishoprics was recognized. Initially, these were Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome; that list grew to include Constantinople and Jerusalem in 451. In the seventh century, Alexandria and Jerusalem fell to the Muslims, and the importance of Antioch declined, leaving the bishop of Constantinople (called the patriarch) and the bishop of Rome (that is, the pope) as the two foremost leaders of the Church.

The Church also expanded beyond the boundaries of the empire. Missionaries attached to Rome spread their religion north into Germany, Scandinavia, and the British Isles (firming up contact with the Celtic Christian community, which persisted from the end of the Roman imperial era; see **GURPS Middle Ages 1** for more details). Byzantine missionaries had exceptionally good luck through the Balkans into Eastern Europe and Russia. The most notable figure of this movement was the ninth-century missionary St. Cyril, who invented an alphabet (based heavily on the Greek alphabet) so that the Bible could be translated into Slavic languages, which had no written form up to that point. This alphabet, Glagolitic, in turn became the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet still used in Russia and parts of Eastern Europe. (**GURPS Russia** goes into greater detail on the spread of Christianity in the East.)

Nevertheless, hoped-for Christian unity failed to emerge. For example, the Orthodox Church recognizes seven ecumenical councils; the last was at Nicaea again in 787 to put an end to iconoclasm. However, these councils became less influential as time went by, particularly for Churches outside of Byzantine control. Churches in Mesopotamia and North Africa refused to recognize councils after the third, and the Roman Catholic Church started its own series of councils in 869.

The relationship between the Orthodox and the Catholics became particularly fraught with difficulty. In addition to a number of doctrinal issues, such as the precise wording of the Nicene creed, a significant political issue existed in the relative primacy of the pope and the patriarch. The popes saw themselves as supreme leaders of Christendom, while the patriarchs saw them as first among equals but not rulers. The two became increasingly estranged until, in 1054, a delegation of bishops

sent by Pope Leo IX to Constantinople to make demands on the Patriarch Cerularius ended up angrily excommunicating Cerularius while Cerularius excommunicated the papal delegation. Although this event, which has come to be known as the Great Schism, didn't formally separate the two Churches, it does mark the point at which the two faith traditions finally stopped serious efforts at cooperation. A few tentative moves were made to reunite the two Churches after the Fourth Crusade (mostly attempts by Byzantine emperors trying to gain Western aid against the encroaching Turks), but the Orthodox rank-and-file resoundingly rejected them. The body of the Orthodox Church remained adamant in its refusal to compromise its doctrines to the end of the empire and beyond.

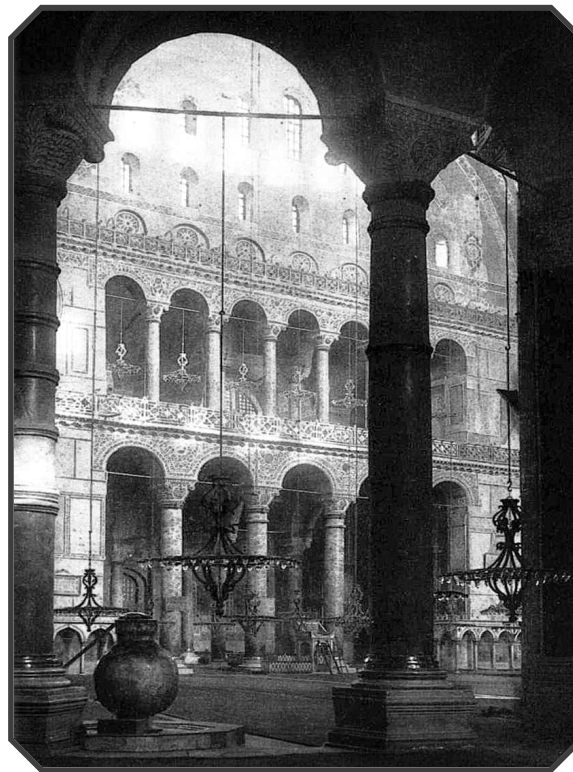
ORTHODOX PRACTICE

Orthodox hierarchy and ceremonies resemble those of many other Christian sects, particularly Roman Catholicism. For example, most clergy are subject to the authority of a bishop. New Christians are initiated by baptism with water. Communal

services are celebrated on Sunday with hymns, readings, and a priest officiating, who delivers sermons and distributes consecrated wine and bread. The religious calendar is organized around saints' days. People cross themselves when they pray.

However, in addition to numerous theological differences of greater or lesser subtlety, some unique aspects were present in Orthodox practice and custom. While both East and West had a hierarchy of clergy (deacons and assorted lesser functionaries, priests, bishops, archbishops and metropolitan bishops, pope or patriarch), the Orthodox didn't recognize differences in *theological* authority between types of bishop. To them, the difference in ranks was essentially administrative. Orthodoxy also had a tendency toward asceticism, teaching

denial of the flesh more enthusiastically than its Western cousin. Nevertheless, while the West moved toward complete clerical celibacy, men might be admitted to the Orthodox priesthood or lesser positions if they were married before taking their vows, though bishops were required to be celibate. Priests were bearded in the East, but clean-shaven in the West. Nonetheless, though Orthodoxy was fairly permissive in some details of worship (services in the local language rather than Latin or Greek were entirely acceptable), it was also exceptionally conservative on matters of doctrine, becoming increasingly inclined to reject many of the West's theological innovations, particularly in the late Middle Ages.



Icons

The best-known and most obvious physical manifestations of Orthodoxy were icons, paintings of holy people. The stated purpose of icons was to provide a “window into heaven,” illustrating blessed individuals and important principles to a largely illiterate audience through a complex visual language (see *Iconography* in **GURPS Low-Tech Companion 1**, p. 13). Many Orthodox homes had at least one icon, kept in a place of honor. Those who could afford them would have several. Places of worship might have scores of them.

According to Orthodox doctrine, icons may be *venerated*, but not *worshipped*. That is, the Orthodox believe that icons might be treated with respect (for example, greeted or bowed to on entering a room, kissed as part of prayer, and otherwise treated with the highest regard). Some also believe that notable icons may even provide supernatural benefit. However, the images do not themselves embody anything divine. Icons, and Orthodox art in general, are prohibited from using more than shallow relief carving to avoid prohibitions on graven images, which is taken to mean fully three-dimensional statues. Of course, the line between veneration and worship seemed a very thin one to some.

Buildings

The oldest Byzantine churches were similar to other Late Roman administrative buildings. They were long rectangular buildings with a main entrance on one narrow end and a semi-circular apse on the other. Larger ones might have three or five aisles separated by rows of columns supporting vaulted ceilings down their lengths. Byzantine architects later experimented with other shapes. After the construction of the Hagia Sophia, churches were more often built on square or nearly square cruciform plans. Domes at the center and half-domes around the sides were also common.

CONTROVERSY AND HERESY

Orthodoxy translates as “correct belief,” so in claiming the epithet, the Church sets out a definite position on the importance of getting theological details exactly right. For example, an important recurring issue in Orthodox history was the relationship of the human and the divine in Christ. Many asked whether Christ was human, divine, or something else. Orthodox trinitarian doctrine stated that Christ had both a divine and a human nature, which were united in his person. That is, he was at once God and man. However, not everyone agreed, nor did those who agreed on the premise agree on the details of how that was accomplished. These are just a few notable heresies.

Arianism held that Christ was created by God, making him separate and inferior. (Named after a theologian named Arius, it should not be confused with Aryan racial mythologies.)

Monophysitism maintained that Christ contained a divine nature that completely subsumed his humanity.

Monotheletism held that Christ had human and divine natures but one will.

Nestorianism held that Christ possessed both a human nature (Jesus himself) and a divine nature (the Son of God), which were separate but contained in the same body.

Though suppressed within the empire, Nestorian missionaries were the earliest Christians to penetrate deeply into Asia, reaching China by the seventh century.

Countless other heresies involved other variations on the theme, suggesting many novel linkages between the human and the divine. The emperor Alexius I, for example, is recorded as having lectured a heretic on how Christ’s divine and human natures were united, rather than conjoined or commingled.

One of the other significant theological controversies was *iconoclasm*. For most of its history, the Orthodox Church has supported the veneration of icons (see above). However, for a period in the eighth century and briefly again in the ninth, a furious conflict erupted in the Orthodox world between supporters of the use of icons (*iconophiles* or *iconodules*) and those who regarded any representation of holy persons as inherently heretical or even blasphemous (*iconoclasts*). The objections of the iconoclasts ranged from a fairly obvious resistance to depictions of sacred persons violating the commandment on images (a complaint leveled by later Protestants against Catholics) to more sophisticated arguments going back to the recurring theme of the relationship of the human and divine in Christ and the difficulty of presenting that relationship in art. Iconodules responded that their fondness for icons was not worship. Some accused also the iconoclasts of being unduly influenced by other religions. Notably, the iconoclasts’ objections to sacred images were very close to those offered by many Muslims.

Like any other kind of dispute, though, these arguments went beyond the purely intellectual. Many of them had a regional or political tone as well. For example, the Monophysites were concentrated in Egypt, while the Nestorians predominated in eastern areas. Emperors and the army were the leading iconoclasts, while monasteries were centers of iconophile sentiment.

OTHER RELIGIONS

The empire tolerated the presence of a limited number of non-Christians. During the earlier years of the empire, many visitors, particularly those from Scandinavia and the Slavic world, would have been various flavors of pagan. A few thousand Jews lived in Constantinople. Despite the occasional move by emperors to bring them into the Orthodox fold, the Church actively resisted the idea of forced conversion.

Non-Orthodox Characters

Being a Muslim, Jew, or foreigner of any religion besides Orthodoxy in the Byzantine empire is good for a -5 or -10 point Social Stigma depending on the tenor of the times. Such a person may not be particularly liked or trusted, but will be tolerated. Being a known native Byzantine heretic, pagan, or convert to another religion is at least a -15 Social Stigma. The heretic may also be punished by social rejection, fines, or mutilation, represented by other disadvantages, such as reduced Wealth, Enemies, physical disadvantages like One Hand and One Eye, or Unnatural Feature to represent a slit nose or branding with warning symbols. Most heretics have a Secret instead (minimum -10 points for utter rejection).

The imperial palace had lodgings for Muslim diplomats and important Muslim captives as early as the eighth century. Syrian merchants had a district along the northern shore by the 11th. One of those areas, likely the one at the palace, had a mosque by the 10th century. It was destroyed during general riots on the eve of the Fourth Crusade, but a new one was built shortly after the end of the Latin empire.

However, the general feeling was that other religions were things practiced by foreigners, and anyone who wasn't Orthodox didn't completely belong in the empire. For example, although repression of Jews never reached the heights of Western Europe's later Medieval expulsions and pogroms, a consistent thread of anti-Semitism can be seen throughout the empire's history. Though they could live in the empire, Jews were subject to increased taxes and exclusion from offices and the military as well as unofficial harassment. Actively expressing heretical but still Christian views might lead to official persecution and even mob violence, to the point where particularly oppressed heretics might support invaders of a different religion in hopes of better treatment. Though old religious customs may have survived in places in the form of superstitious ritual and folk magic, actively practicing old Greco-Roman style paganism would likely result in imprisonment and severe punishment, up to and including death.

MONASTICISM

Like the Catholics, the Orthodox had a strong monastic tradition, but of a different character. The basic idea is common among many religious traditions – people choose to take themselves out of secular society to live among others who have dedicated themselves to a life of humility, work, and prayer. Byzantine monks left their homes, donated their worldly goods to their monastery, took vows, lived in segregated communities, and spent most of the time when they weren't working (in fields or on useful trades) in prayer.

However, the details of Byzantine monasticism were, unsurprisingly, different from Western monastic life. Notably, the Orthodox did not have monastic orders. With a few minor exceptions, every monastery was an independent foundation rather than part of a larger organization. They also weren't enthusiastic about cloistering (the practice of isolating monks entirely within their religious community without contact with the outside world). Byzantine monks were generally able to go out into the secular community when they needed to do so. Some monks *did* live in extreme isolation, but they sensibly moved into the wilderness, where running into other people wasn't an issue; no hermits resided in Constantinople.

Just about anybody could enter a monastery, even eunuchs. However, no one was allowed to enter a monastery in order to escape from a marriage, military service, or other obligations. Monasteries also served as political prisons for deposed rulers and their relatives. It was even easy to found a new monastery, so long as someone could raise sufficient funds and get a few other people to join in. The technical minimum was three people, but at least eight was more practical.

Constantinople was home to a great many monasteries, supported by the monks' own labors and frequently by private

donations. A given monastery also might require a significant donation to ensure the new monk's upkeep. The members often did charitable work, providing for the poor in various ways or giving lodging to travelers.

Most monasteries were small residential compounds, much like any other multi-residential dwelling (see *Homes*, p. 34), with a small chapel attached. While the biggest Orthodox monasteries in areas where they had room to grow (notably the Megisti Lavra on Mt. Athos) might have nearly 1,000 monks under their jurisdiction, even the largest inside the city held less than 100 residents, and most included much less than 50.

Monk Characters

Byzantine monks generally have either the Ritualism or Monasticism versions of Disciplines of Faith. Even those with only Monasticism are unlikely to have more than Average wealth. A few monks have Asceticism, but those would be stylites and other very dedicated hermits who would not be found in the city.

RELICS

Like their Western cousins, the Orthodox were very fond of relics – the physical remains and possessions of holy people. Constantinople was filled with such tokens (over 3,500 by one count), including countless saints' bones and various bits of clothing and furniture belonging to Biblical characters, such as the table at which the Last Supper was eaten. Relics were thought to have extraordinary powers, usually for healing, protection, and converting sinners and heathens. They were also used to seal oaths.

As in the West, relics were kept in elaborate containers called reliquaries, ranging in size from small pendants to large cabinets. Reliquaries were often richly decorated with precious metals and gems. They could be quite valuable themselves (and subject to theft by non-Christian or simply not-very-devout thieves), although not nearly so valuable as their contents.

One of the most prized of all relics was allegedly in Byzantine hands: the True Cross. According to tradition, the Cross was discovered by Constantine's mother and kept in Jerusalem. In the seventh century, however, a large part was moved to Constantinople, where it remained until the 14th century.

Two of the more popular relics of Constantinople were associated with the Virgin Mary, generally called by her epithet *Theotokos*, "the one who bears God." One was the *Hodegetria*, an icon of Mary holding the infant Christ, said to have been painted by St. Luke (author of the eponymous Gospel) and stored in a monastery specially built for that purpose. The other was the *Maphorion*, a robe or shawl she was believed to have worn. Both were regarded as signs of a special relationship between Mary and the city. When the city was attacked, they were often paraded around the walls to encourage the troops.

Other notable relics included the crown of thorns Christ wore when he was crucified (stored in the palace) and the bodies of the evangelist Luke and the apostle Andrew at Holy Apostles Church. A number of patriarchs and emperors going back to Constantine himself, several of them saints themselves, were also buried there.

RANK, SPECTACLE, AND CEREMONY

As strange as it may seem to people in an age of sober, cynical *realpolitik*, a great deal of Byzantine power was grounded not just in the empire's ability to mobilize money and military force, but in its ability to impress people with appearances. Ceremony and spectacle were vital tools of state. Constantinople, as the center of wealth and power, was the sharpest tool in that particular box.

The remarkable effect of exposure to official spectacle is illustrated by an incident around the First Crusade. A Viking ruler visiting Alexius I was received at the harbor and taken on a carpeted route to the palace. He and his party were then treated to a feast where gold and other gifts were lavishly distributed, followed by an athletic exhibition at the Hippodrome. The king was so impressed that he gave the emperor several of the ships he had brought with him. As it happened, the foreign dignitary didn't need them anymore; most of his followers elected to stay in Constantinople and work for the Byzantines instead! Although the Vikings' response is extreme, it's still similar to the reaction of other visitors. Ambassadors from the Abbassid caliphate at its height – no strangers to large and well-decorated cities such as Baghdad – found it impressive. Visitors from the North and West found it breathtaking (where a settlement of 50,000 souls could be considered large, and paved streets might be a novelty, to say nothing of completely carpeted floors).

The general character of the described reception is representative of how the city treated people it wanted to impress, natives and visitors alike. Ceremonies were, if not always exactly *public* (though many were), then at least well-attended. Part of the point of a ceremony, after all, was to make a show out of what's happening. In the case of grand ceremonial processions, par for the course whenever important foreign dignitaries visited or when the emperor went anywhere at all, a crowd could be counted on to turn out. Even relatively private official ceremonies were well-attended by crowds of prominent spectators. For example, promotion ceremonies for officials involved a sizable number of *other* officials who attended to welcome their colleague into his new position. High administrators together received their salaries in gold and silk annually from the emperor in a great ceremony every Good Friday.

Gifts were frequently part of Byzantine ceremonies. The highest-grade silks and a few other extremely expensive goods whose trade was prohibited by the empire were only available as official gifts. That Viking who visited Alexius was given a robe that he could have obtained in no other way. Even in smaller ceremonies, just about anyone directly involved received at least a small gift, and official parades were often accompanied by functionaries tossing coins to the crowd. The practice of distributing money to onlookers ensured a large and enthusiastic turnout.

Processional routes and chambers where ceremonies were to be held were elaborately decorated. Streets might be strewn with flowers or perfume-scented sawdust, and other surfaces ornamented with banners and various other decorations.

Although often done at governmental expense, shopkeepers along processional routes frequently would undertake that expense themselves to curry favor with imperial officials and advertise goods.

During ceremonies, theatrical devices were integrated into the proceedings. The emperor was often hidden behind a curtain, which was pulled back to reveal him dramatically at the appropriate moment. Some locations, notably the Magnaura palace, contained automata and hydraulic mechanisms such as a rising throne to overawe the visitor.

Spare No Expense

In **GURPS** terms, all of this pomp constitutes using direct bribery, Appearance modifiers (based on the appearance of the city and ceremonial sites!), and a diverse range of complementary skills (see **GURPS Social Engineering**, p. 21) in support of bonuses to reaction rolls and Influence rolls based on Diplomacy skill. Using the rules for luxury pricing and decorated equipment in **GURPS Low-Tech** (p. 37), any item handed out by the emperor has a *minimum* CF of +5. Often, it was worth more as necessary to make it at least commensurate with the Status of the recipient of the gift. Influence on diplomatic hostages can be treated as a case of ongoing relationships, with the Byzantine diplomatic machine working very hard to accumulate bonuses to loyalty checks.

A more subtle use of spectacle was to win over long-term visitors slowly. A number of foreign rulers were allowed or required to place relatives in and around the imperial court. These people may have been ambassadors, leaders of semi-permanent trade missions, children married into the Byzantine aristocracy, or simply hostages exchanged according to treaty in order to ensure peace. Once in Constantinople, they were encouraged to become used to the luxurious lifestyle of the capital. This usually had the effect of making such visitors markedly more sympathetic to the Byzantine viewpoint when they returned home. Even if they didn't become rulers in their own right, they gave a voice to Byzantine concerns in their native lands.

Although Constantinople's monumental architecture provided an unmatched backdrop to these goings-on, a great deal of work had to be coordinated by official masters of ceremony: Prepare the site of the ceremony. Ensure that each participant knew his proper place. Decide how to get to the site (depending on circumstances, the most important people in the ceremony might travel on foot, on horseback, by chariot, or on a litter). Make sure the appropriate items of imperial regalia were available and in good repair. Plan a menu for a banquet. Recruit athletes or musicians for entertainment. And that's only the basics!

Adventure Seed: The Laundry Chase

The adventurers, employed by an imperial functionary, have been sent early one morning to pick up a bundle of red-dyed tunics from the tailor who has just finished making them. They arrive to find the tailor distraught. His shop has been burgled in the night. Worse yet, the fine tunics are gone! That's bad for the tailor, who would like to get paid but can't until the garments are delivered, but it's even worse for the PCs, who need to have the tunics by the evening for a ceremony to formally receive an important ambassador. They must track down the thief, find the garments, and deliver them *unblemished* to the palace (because there won't be time to wash and dry them) in the course of the day or face a diplomatic disaster.

Since the emperor just going to church meant arranging a parade, the amount of preparation necessary for all of these ceremonies led naturally to a rigorous and busy schedule for the emperor and many officials. It also meant extensive documentation specifying the precise procedure for a wide range of ceremonies, down to ceremonial pleasantries, where and how many times someone approaching the emperor prostrates himself, wardrobe for participants and important spectators, and so on. For example, several pages were written on exactly how the emperor should ask various ambassadors "How are you, and how's everybody back home?"

The need for organization played into an elaborate system of honorary titles, which came in a distinct order. The following example list covers titles in use in and around the 10th century, in descending order of precedence.

- Basileus Autokrator.
- Basileus.
- Magistros.
- Vestes.
- Anthypatos.
- Patrikios.
- Protospatharios.
- Dishypatos.
- Spatharokandidatos.
- Spatharios.
- Hypatos.
- Kandidatos.
- Basilikos Mandator.
- Vestetor.
- Silentiarios.
- Stratelates.



Most honors grant or recognize Status, though particularly lowly ones may simply count as Courtesy Rank. They were usually awarded to officials and members of the aristocracy. (Although almost no titles were hereditary during the period in question, just about any member of a politically connected family could count on acquiring some during his life.) They might also be awarded to foreigners, depending on the esteem in which the emperor held them or their nations. The overall order was also punctuated with titles reserved for eunuchs (which had some overlap with the main list) and women (most of which were simply feminine forms of the main list).

However, the list changed over time. A process of "rank inflation" caused some titles to be overused, requiring new and better titles to be created while others fell down the list and

into disuse. For example, *hypatos* (consul), a title that had survived from the Roman period, was used so much that *dishypatos* (double-consul) had to be invented. Both became so overused that they lost all distinction and fell out of favor by the later Crusades. The emperor Alexius I introduced no less than four high-ranking titles based on *sebastos* (venerable), including *panhypersebastos* (venerable over all), *protosebastos* (first of the venerable), and *sebastokrator* (venerable lord), in order to give new distinctions to the aristocrats with whom he needed to curry favor. Even as the empire shrank during

its final days, the list of honors grew. The Paeleologan period had at least 32 ranked court titles.

The order of precedence was followed in arranging participants and official spectators at ceremonies. For example, a protospatharios would get better seating than a dishypatos, who would get a better place than a spatharios, who would in turn get a better place than a hypatos. To complicate matters, noble titles were only loosely linked to governmental offices, which had their own hierarchy. Both were separate from military ranks. Inevitably, ranks and titles didn't line up (a logothete, for example, was also a protospatharios, but not always), so the masters of ceremony had to sort out details of priority. An organizer might need a Professional Skill (Master of Ceremonies) skill to resolve the details and *Savoir-Faire* to smooth any feathers ruffled over quibbles about precedence!

It's possible that ceremonial experts assisted with the details. Someone being presented to the emperor was often accompanied by a functionary who led him around. Those functionaries may have been trained in the appropriate ceremonial choreography, allowing them to prompt or even speak for less-prepared foreigners and other participants. This took the burden of remembering exactly what to do and when to do it off of the subject of the ceremony so that everything could go as smoothly and impressively as intended.

Still, practicality did win out from time to time. Notably, a great deal of this order went by the wayside during times of war. Processions continued (or, indeed, intensified) when the city was under direct attack as a morale-building tool. However, if the emperor were in the field, the main reason for all of those ceremonies was no longer present, so the city had a break from the constant spectacles.

HELP WITH HIERARCHICAL CLASSIFICATIONS

The *10th-Century Title Table* (p. 27) lists offices, honors, and other hierarchical classifications mentioned in this supplement, along with their pronunciation and a Rank or Status associated with them, calibrated for the 10th century and for use in the city of Constantinople. A great many more titles existed for offices and honors outside the city and in other periods, and many minor titles were in use during the period but are difficult to classify.

The Byzantine system of titles and honors is extensive enough to require more than the typical 8 levels of Rank or Status.

Thus, some of the positions here include *fractional* Rank or Status (a concept introduced in *Social Engineering*), where the extra 0.5 costs 2 points. (For example, a dekarchos pays a total of 7 points for his Rank 1.5.) The extra 0.5 serves as a “tiebreaker” for determining who outranks whom, and ensures a minimum +1 reaction from those below you; e.g., a pentarchos reacts at +1 to a dekarchos *or* a pentakontarchos. For all other purposes, ignore this fraction.

Officials often, but do not always, have an honorific title and Status commensurate with their Rank. “Epi” titles (see p. 18) are highly varied and used by everyone, from otherwise nameless clerks with Administrative Status 1 to subsidiary designations specifying the duties of high officials; for example, the epi tou kanikleiou was typically a chartoularios.

10th-Century Title Table

Name	Pronunciation	Level	Notes
Army (Military Rank)			
Patrikos	pat-ri-kos	7	
Tourmarchos	to-ur-mar-chos	6	
Chiliarchos	chi-li-ar-chos	5	
Komes	ko-mes	4	
Kentarchos	ken-tar-chos	3	
Pentakontarchos	pen-ta-kon-tar-chos	2	
Dekarchos	dek-ar-chos	1.5	
Pentarchos	pent-ar-chos	1	
Clergy (Clerical Rank)			
Patriarkos (patriarch)	pa-tri-ar-kos	8	
Episkopos	e-pis-ko-pos	7	
Metropolitikos (metropolitan bishop)	me-tro-po-li-ti-kos		
Archiepiskopos (archbishop)	ar-chie-pis-ko-pos	6	
Episkopos (bishop)	e-pis-ko-pos	5	
Presbyteros (priest)	pres-by-te-ros	4	
Diakonos (deacon)	dia-ko-nos	3	
Hypodiakonos (subdeacon)	hy-po-di-a-ko-nos	2	
Anagnostes (reader or lector)	an-ag-nos-tes	1	
Psaltes (cantor)	psal-tes	0.5	



Name	Pronunciation	Level	Notes
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Government Officials (Administrative Rank)

Eparchos	e-par-kos	6	
Sakellarios	sa-kel-la-ri-os	6	
Praitor ton Demon	prai-tor ton de-mon	5	
Protasekretis	pro-ta-se-kre-tis	6	
Koiaistor	koi-a-is-tor	5	
Legatarios	le-ga-ta-ri-os	5	
Logothetes	lo-go-the-tes	4-6	[1]
Chartoularios	char-tou-la-ri-os	3-5	[2]
Geitoniarches	gei-to-ni-ar-ches	4	
Krites	kri-tes	3	
Logothetes	lo-go-the-tes	3	
tou Praitoriou	tou prai-to-ri-ou		
Symponos	sym-po-nos	3	
Boullotes	boul-lo-tes	2	
Elaioparchos	e-lai-op-ar-chos	2	
Meteres	met-er-es	2	
Grammatikos	gram-mat-i-kos	1	

Household Officials (Administrative Rank)

Parakoimomenos	pa-ra-koi-mo-me-nos	7	[3]
Chartoularios	char-tou-la-ri-os	6	
tou Vestiariou	tou ves-ti-a-ri-ou		
Praipositos	prai-po-si-tos	6	
Protovestarios	pro-to-ves-ta-ri-os	5	
Koubikoularios	kou-bi-kou-la-ri-os	-	[3]

Honors (Status)

Basileus Autokrator	ba-si-leus au-to-kra-tor	8	
Basileus	ba-si-leus	7.5	
Magistros	ma-gis-tros	7	
Vestes	ves-tes	6.5	
Anthypatos	an-thyp-a-tos	6	
Patrikios	pa-tri-ki-os	5.5	
Protospatharios	pro-to-spa-tha-ri-os	5	
Dishypatos	dis-hyp-a-tos	4.5	
Spatharokandidatos	spa-tha-ro-kan-di-da-tos	4	
Spatharios	spa-tha-ri-os	3.5	
Hypatos	hyp-a-tos	3	
Kandidatos	kan-di-da-tos	2.5	
Basilikos Mandator	ba-si-li-kos man-da-tor	2	
Vestetor	ves-te-tor	1.5	
Silentiarios	si-len-ti-a-ri-os	1	
Stratelates	stra-te-la-tes	0.5	

Notes

[1] Logothetes have greater or lesser rank depending on the importance of their department.

[2] A chartoularios has Administrative Rank one level lower than the logothetes he serves. A megas chartoularios, if one exists in a given ministry, has Administrative Rank a half-level lower.

[3] The parakoimomenos, as head of the imperial household, also supervises a staff of koubikoularioi (domestic servants) of varying Servant Rank (*not* Administrative Rank). Those who clean, carry, and so on directly for the imperial family have Servant Rank 4-6; lesser servants who essentially never have contact with the emperor have Rank as low as 1.

ECONOMY AND COMMERCE

Like any other nation of its level of technology, the Byzantine economy was based mostly on agricultural production. Though the empire lost the rich territories of Egypt and Syria in the seventh century, its remaining territories had a good deal of reasonably good farmland, particularly through Anatolia. It had lucrative vineyards and olive groves. Additionally, a number of small deposits of iron, silver, and other metals were scattered through the empire.

Constantinople was a trade hub. Next to no restrictions were placed on what could be *imported* into the empire or traded internally. However, some *export* restrictions existed. Gold was at the top of the list. The longer the precious metal stayed in circulation within the empire, the more opportunities came up for it to be captured in taxation and added to the imperial treasury for diplomatic or military use. Also restricted were weapons, staple foods, and the finest silks (again reserving their use outside the empire for high-value bribes and impressive diplomatic gifts).

Constantinople was also an important pilgrimage site. Although it didn't have direct biblical associations, the city's hundreds of churches contained thousands of relics (see *Relics*, p. 24). The city's sacred associations, combined with its relative security, made Constantinople a major Christian tourist attraction. (Most biblical sites were usually either in war-torn locations or occupied by Muslims.)

Constantinople's primary enterprise, though, was arguably government. It was home to the imperial household, the empire's leading church, and a great deal of administrative apparatus. It was, therefore, home to a disproportionately large number of wealthy households and a government that put an emphasis on overawing visitors with physical symbols and ceremonies. This, in turn, pumped cash brought in via taxation back into circulation.

Prices

Few absolute restrictions were put on *prices*. However, a merchant was limited in how much *profit* he could make in the city. Those limits, though, only applied to middlemen. Producers could usually charge what the market would bear. Craftsmen could sell their own goods for whatever they liked without direct constraints. Likewise, farmers sold their grain onto a more-or-less open market. However, the government exercised *indirect* control over the price of grain by stockpiling it in good years and selling it in bad ones, keeping the supply and therefore prices relatively stable. For some years after Constantinople was established as a capital, a free grain dole for the poor was in place, mirroring that of Rome. That would have had an impact on local prices, but it was discontinued when the Syrian and Egyptian provinces were lost to the Persians.

MONEY

The Byzantine economy in general and that of Constantinople in particular was very monetized. Most commercial transactions and, by the 10th century, almost all taxes were in cash

rather than in kind. Therefore, the economy naturally required hard currency. Although the empire had many short-lived mints in various places, Constantinople was by far the most important mint throughout the empire's existence, and the only one for many periods. (During the sixth and seventh centuries, some small mints to supply the exarchates in Italy and Africa.)

The first true Byzantine coinage was issued under Anastasius at the end of the fifth century. Most transactions were carried out with currency based on the copper *nummus* (meaning, simply, "coin"), a tiny, sequin-like disk no more than 1/2" across. The nummus was the penny of the day, so most meaningful transactions were carried out with a variety of denominations of copper coins.

Coin	Value (nummi)	Value (\$)
Nummus	1	0.20
Pentannumium	5	1
Decannumium	10	2
Half-follis	20	4
Follis	40	8

"Follis" means "purse," reflecting an earlier practice of transacting business with sealed pouches of small-value coins. The values above are appropriate for the sixth century, but all coins shrank significantly during the seventh century, with commensurate impact on their values.

Very large transactions were carried out with gold coins. The gold coin of the early Byzantine period was the *solidus* or *nomisma*, a coin under an inch in diameter and worth between 6,000 and 24,000 nummi depending on the cumulative effects of various currency reforms, or a uniform value of \$1,200. The solidus was consistently high-quality into the 11th century, maintaining its weight and a gold content of 95% or above. This made it a remarkably influential currency. During the

early Middle Ages, countries in Western Europe that weren't wealthy enough to mint their own gold coins used the solidus in their monetary systems. Not only were Byzantine coins the most common gold coins in Western Europe up to the 13th century, they influenced the naming of coins. The Byzantine solidus, for example, became the French *sou*, while medieval Western Europeans would often refer to gold coins as "byzants" or "bessants" (from "Byzantium"), a term that made its way into heraldry.

Silver coins were quite rare, perhaps because gold sufficed to fill the high-value coinage role. The silver *hexagram* was issued for less than 100 years starting in the late seventh century, and the silver *miliaresion* appeared from the ninth to the 11th. Neither achieved the importance of the copper and gold coins.

Although aspects of the Anastasian currency remained very stable through some very bad times, Byzantine coinage as a whole became thoroughly debased in the 11th century. By the reign of Alexius I, coins smaller than the half-follis had vanished, the remaining copper coins had shrunk significantly, and the solidus contained a fraction of its original gold content. Alexius replaced the old currency with a new series of coins.

Coin	Material	Value	
		noummioi	\$
Half-tetareron	copper	0.5	0.58
Tetareron noummion	copper	1	1.15
Tetareron noummion	billon	3	3.45
Aspron trachi	billon	18	20.70
Aspron trachi	electrum	288	331.20
Hyperpyron	gold	864	1,000

In addition to making significant use of the alloys billon (copper and silver) and electrum (silver and gold), the scheme was complicated by having different versions of the same denominations made in different materials, so two coins of the same name could have different values. The hyperpyron, while the same weight as the solidus and reasonably stable up to the Fourth Crusade, was not quite as pure as the earlier gold coin, hence less valuable. Many of these coins were slightly cup-shaped, making it easier to stack them.

The Alexian currency continued even after the Fourth Crusade, but declined in quality. After more reforms to fit a diminished economy, gold currency was discontinued in the 14th century, leaving only poor silver and copper coinage until the end.

INDUSTRY

Cities were centers of industrial production in the Byzantine empire, and Constantinople was the center of a great deal of particularly high-end work. Smiths working in copper and bronze were likely concentrated to the north of the palace district, in a neighborhood that obtained its name from them: *Chalkoprataia*. Glass production – for vessels, windows, and mosaic tesserae – was carried out in the *Strategion* neighborhood in the northwestern part of the city. There is evidence of a significant leather industry, though the foul smells associated with leather tanning may have kept production facilities outside of the city proper.

Constantinople is believed to be the source of a glazed, white-bodied pottery found through the empire, but actual production facilities may have been in Galata and other spots very close to but technically outside of the city. The white-ware

also served as a basis for a high-quality multicolored painted ware, which was likewise produced in or around the city.

Naturally, Constantinople was a center of luxury trades. Factories and workshops for the production of jewelry, fine silk, and other imperial monopolies or near-monopolies were located in or around the palace. Nearby, practical items of strategic importance – arms and armor – were made.

Not only were Constantinople's craft products traded around the empire and beyond, so were its craftsmen. Skilled artisans were occasionally loaned to foreign rulers to produce artworks and buildings for them. A Byzantine mosaic artist was considered a particular prize.

*He who has bread
has many problems.
He who has no bread
has only one.*

– *Byzantine proverb*

Many craftsmen were organized into guilds, though certainly not all and possibly not the majority. Numerous guilds were highly specialized. For example, separate and mutually exclusive guilds existed for importing silk, processing raw silk, and dyeing and weaving silk. These were all in turn separate from textile retailers and tailors.

As in the West, the guilds in Constantinople were useful for mutual support, product regulation, and assigning civic tasks. The guilds were often responsible for contributions to particular events and ceremonies. In emergencies, they could be called on as an auxiliary militia.

Weird Science and Industry

The Byzantine Empire was certainly technologically advanced for its time. If legends of its heritage can be believed, it could be even more so. Though only a handful of marvels are attributed directly to the Byzantines, the empire's dusty libraries could hold countless secrets of the ancients. (See *Technology*, pp. 36-37, for the real devices, and *Fantasy-Tech*, p. 43, for ideas on where to go with imaginary technologies). Of course, if the Byzantines have this knowledge, it raises the question of why its practical products weren't widely available.

First, Byzantine high-tech leans strongly toward exotic luxuries for use by the imperial administration, with a particular eye to diplomacy: hydraulic and mechanical wonders, elaborate mosaic, fine silk, and so on. Greek fire, terrifying though it is, is an exception. The Byzantines, to

some extent like their Roman forebears, simply weren't interested in technology for its own sake. They valued stability over progress, and the ability to sway hearts and minds over the power to till fields and destroy armies.

Second, where they did use unusual technologies, the Byzantines were *very* interested in controlling their unique resources. Anything that the empire knew how to make and others didn't was treated as something approaching a national treasure, to be provided only to close allies or those who require the most expensive bribes. Technicians who could make them were closely watched. Moreover, getting to own or even use, say, Archimedes' reflective heat ray was as much a political act as anything else – or the subject of a concerted campaign of scholarship and industrial espionage . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

NOTABLE PEOPLE

"What was he like?" Emile asked.

Gervais stretched his leg, sore even from the few minutes of standing, out on the couch. "The emperor? He seemed . . . tall. And he had a beard."

"What did he say?"

"Didn't understand a word he said."

"Did you say anything to him?"

Gervais frowned into space. "I think I swore fealty to him."

RULERS

As in many periods, the best-documented people are the rulers. The Byzantine emperors were a varied lot, ranging from peasants to those born in the imperial palace. These are some of the more interesting ones.

JUSTINIAN (482-565, R. 527-565) AND THEODORA (c. 497-548)

Both Justinian and Theodora came from relatively humble origins. Justinian's family were peasants who lived near modern Serbia. However, his uncle was able to come up through the ranks of the army to become the emperor Justin I. Justinian was one of Justin's closest advisors and became his designated heir shortly before the elderly emperor's death. Theodora came from an even lower social stratum. She was the daughter of an animal trainer in the Hippodrome and a dancer, and entered show business herself at an early age. She became acquainted with many high officials while having an affair with a governor of Libya, and eventually encountered Justinian. They were married after a law preventing actresses from marrying officials was repealed specifically for that purpose.

Once they reached the throne, they pushed the empire to a height it would never regain. They spent vast sums expanding the empire to the West, stopping formidable enemies in the East, rebuilding the city after the Nika riots, and making at least a temporary peace in some conflicts within the Church. Although not brilliant administrators, Justinian and Theodora had a talent for gathering skilled agents and advisors, allowing them to execute their policies with considerable success. They also established the Byzantine tradition of elaborate ceremony at court (see *Rank, Spectacle, and Ceremony*, pp. 25-27).

Though his territorial gains were short-lived, Justinian ensured his ongoing influence in a round of legal reforms embodied in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, also known as the *Codex*

Justinianus. One of the empire's last major texts to be published in Latin, this massive work was a compilation of existing laws and interpretations, intended to serve as the sole source of law going forward from its publication. It retained considerable importance within the empire and became a fundamental legal text in the West in later centuries, both directly and as a model for new legal codes. Justinian's reforms also included notable expansions of rights for women, probably due to Theodora's influence.

If encountered, Justinian is pleasant, with a ruddy complexion, a round face, and an easy manner. Short, pale Theodora has left at least part of her theatrical past behind her, bearing herself with great dignity. Their enemies represented them respectively as a dissolute demon in human form and a vicious shrew with a past as an enthusiastic sexual deviant. Though that characterization is unlikely, it can be useful if the GM wants to present the Byzantine empire as an evil dictatorship.

HERACLIUS (c. 575-641, R. 610-641)

Heraclius was born into a military family. His father, of the same name, was a prominent general fighting the Persians in the early 590s, after which he was appointed exarch of Africa. In 608, Heraclius, his father, and a cousin revolted against the unpopular emperor Phocas. Heraclius himself took Constantinople without an appreciable fight, thanks to the sudden defection of an imperial bodyguard unit. According to tradition, he executed Phocas himself.

Having achieved the throne, Heraclius spent most of his reign either at war or preparing for it. Beset by Avars in the Balkans and Persians rampaging through the empire's eastern possessions – coming within sight of Constantinople on the far side of the Bosphorus – he had to buy off his powerful enemies to gain some time. In 622, he launched a years-long, multi-lateral counterattack against the Persians.

Persian and Avar armies managed to besiege Constantinople, but they were unable to penetrate the city's defenses. At the same time, Heraclius was able to strike into Mesopotamia to much greater effect, sacking major cities and making it about as far as the future site of Baghdad before the Persians surrendered in 629.

However, his gains were short-lived. Within five years, the empire suffered an onslaught of Muslim armies. Heraclius would lose what he had regained from the Persians by the time of his death. He did not take the field during their advance, probably because of age and declining health, and he could not find generals to match his own skill.

Many of his domestic efforts were passing as well. His attempts to integrate Monophysites with Orthodoxy via novel theological ploys were roundly rejected. However, his reign did have a few lasting impacts, notably the final abandonment of Latin in favor of Greek as an official language.

Oddly, Heraclius was widely respected by Muslim historians, who regarded him as a wise, just, and pious ruler. Some wrote that he had personally accepted Islam but had been unable to convert the empire. However, there's nothing in Byzantine sources to suggest that Heraclius had ever encountered any Muslims or, indeed, had the faintest idea what Islam was.

If encountered, Heraclius is a classic leader of warriors, able to withstand the rigors of the field as well as any soldier in his earlier days, but probably suffering from either physical debilities or something like post-traumatic stress as an older man. He is also, if not a deeply inspirational leader, at least a highly competent one, whom circumstances robbed of lasting success. He doesn't have fanatical followers, but he can consistently convince people to do what he needs them to. His wife, Martina, frequently accompanies him. Martina is his niece, and the marriage is deeply unpopular, but Heraclius is very fond of her.

IRENE (c. 750-803, r. 797-802)

Irene was born into an aristocratic family in Athens. She was an orphan, raised by her uncle, the regional governor of Greece. She was brought to Constantinople while hardly out of her teens. In short order, she was married to the man who would become the emperor Leo IV. When Leo died on campaign against the Bulgars in 780, Irene became regent in the name of their son (the future Constantine VI) until he reached majority.

Although Leo had been an iconoclast, Irene was a semi-secret iconophile. She maneuvered for a sympathetic patriarch to be elected in 784. In 787, she called an ecumenical council

at Nicaea to formally endorse the use of icons, ending iconoclasm for the moment despite opposition from the military.

Irene oversaw some important moments in stabilizing the empire's territorial erosion. Notably, she supported efforts to defeat the Slavs occupying Greece by 782, and she reached arrangements to pay off the legendary caliph Haroun al-Raschid in return for a temporary end to Arab raids on Anatolia. She also flirted with the possibility of uniting Eastern and Western Europe's great powers. She allegedly considered a marriage between Constantine and a daughter of Charlemagne, or perhaps even Charlemagne and herself.

However, considerable resistance to her ambitions arose from many opponents, not the least of whom was her son. Constantine was declared emperor in 790, though Irene stayed on as a co-ruler. They warily plotted against one another until, in 797, Irene had him seized and blinded. Constantine died shortly thereafter, leaving Irene in control of the empire. After eight centuries of Roman and Byzantine imperial continuity, she was the first woman to be sole official ruler of the empire. She

reigned for a few years more, until she was herself overthrown in 802 and imprisoned in a convent on an island in the Aegean, dying the next year.

Although her reign was an important moment in restoring the traditional Orthodox position on icons and the territorial integrity of the empire, it also contributed to a further worsening of relations between the Byzantine empire and the papacy, despite considerable efforts to improve relations with Rome. According to tradition, only men were allowed to be emperor. Irene managed to overcome that limitation as a practical matter, but outside the empire, her accession was not so well regarded. One of the pretexts used by Pope Leo III in crowning Charlemagne emperor on Christmas of the year 800 was that the imperial throne had become vacant. Essentially, he argued that Irene wasn't a legitimate ruler and it therefore fell to him to appoint one who was. This was but one more grievance that contributed to the ultimate split between Eastern and Western Churches.

In later depictions, Irene is very tall and very thin. (Irene was revered for restoring icons, so she ended up on some of them herself.) She may have been selected during a bridal show, a custom in which large numbers of women were paraded past the young heir to the throne until he picked one as a wife, so she may have been quite attractive as well. However, she clearly played the dangerous game of Byzantine politics well. She was very good at keeping secrets until the last minute, and capable of acting without mercy or pity.



BASIL I THE MACEDONIAN (c. 830-886, r. 867-886)

The emperor Basil I is the Byzantine empire's great rags-to-riches story. Although of Armenian descent, Basil was born into a peasant family in Macedonia in the early 830s. As a young man, he managed to find a job in the stables of a distant relative of the emperor Michael III, which started him up a remarkably tall ladder. While still in that position, he is said to have been the lover of an exceptionally rich widow who endowed him with considerable wealth. He eventually caught the emperor's attention in a wrestling match where he defeated a noted Bulgarian athlete. The impressed emperor made Basil a bodyguard and, eventually, *parakoimomenos*. This was an unusual honor since Basil was emphatically not a eunuch, as was customary for that position. By 866, Basil had eliminated his major rivals for influence at the palace and been appointed a junior emperor. The next year, Basil had Michael killed and ascended the throne himself.

For a former peasant who still spoke Greek with a thick accent, Basil proved an able administrator and a wildly successful emperor, kicking the restoration of Byzantine territory into high gear. Still, his personal life was not necessarily the best. After becoming Michael's bodyguard, he was ordered to divorce his first wife (and mother of his first two children) and marry Eudokia Ingerina, a mistress of Michael's. This gave Michael a means of keeping Eudokia around without having to divorce his own wife. Although Eudokia and Basil stayed married until her death, Basil considered divorcing her in favor of a marriage alliance with the Carolingians, while Eudokia had at least one significant affair. Moreover, because of the circumstances of their relationship, many believed that their second son (who would eventually become the emperor Leo VI) was actually fathered by Michael. Basil himself probably thought as much, too.

Basil's eventful life ended at a relatively early age. He died in 886, as the result of complications following injuries sustained from a hunting accident.

If encountered, Basil may be unrefined, but he's extremely intelligent and physically fit, with formidable combat skills. He's also utterly ruthless if he believes himself threatened.

ALEXIUS I COMNENUS (c. 1050-1118, r. 1081-1118)

Alexius came from an established noble family. Like Justinian, his uncle (Isaac I) had been an emperor, though his uncle's reign was brief and there were several other emperors separating Alexius from his uncle's reign. Alexius had a long military career starting in the 1070s, but even at an early age, he showed a gift for diplomacy. He had a knack for either settling conflicts peaceably or fighting enemies with other people's armies – Turks against Turks; Cumans against Pechenegs. However, he may have overreached himself by setting Franks against Muslims in the Crusades. Despite the flow of Western armies rapidly growing out of control, Alexius still performed remarkable feats of diplomacy by getting the Crusader lords to return recovered land to the empire, even if the various agreements were eventually breached.

Alexius was also well-versed in plotting and counter-plotting. His near-bloodless overthrow of Nikephoros III involved quietly drawing together significant military support and bribing guards to allow troops loyal to him into the city. He likewise foiled better than a dozen attempts to depose him. He counteracted some and headed off others before they started by forging strong alliances with various important families, granting them important offices. Though this gave the empire much-needed stability, it also set a precedent of limiting social mobility within the empire.

Through his life, Alexius received particularly important support from the women around him. For example, his mother manipulated public opinion in the capital in order to prevent any action Nikephoros III, who suspected a brewing revolt, might take against her son. She continued to advise him well into his reign, and often served as regent while Alexius was away from Constantinople.

If encountered, Alexius is dark, with deep-set eyes and a neat beard. He is patient, polite, and erudite. He makes full use of the accumulated centuries of Byzantine ceremony and grandeur. He was a reasonably good fighter during his younger days, but if encountered during the Crusades, his fighting skills are likely rusty. Despite his formidable social skills, he has a faint stammer, which he probably puts to use as a way of modulating the formidable imperial presence.

OTHER INTERESTING PEOPLE

The best-documented people in the Byzantine empire (or, indeed, just about anywhere) were supported or thwarted by countless others. Here are a few of the more interesting people who resided in Constantinople about whom modern scholars know enough to say something.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (c. 350-407)

There is some question as to whether or not John Chrysostom (Gold-Tongued) was born a Christian, but he more than made up for any deficiencies by becoming one of the most venerated churchmen of all time. His early education

in his home town of Antioch included both classical and Christian sources, and he became deeply involved in religion. In the 370s, he dabbled in asceticism, even spending a few years living alone in the wilderness. However, his health suffered, so he returned to Antioch to enter the clergy. Once he became a priest, he became known for a captivating style of preaching. In 398, he was appointed bishop of Constantinople.

Though the bishopric of Constantinople had not yet achieved its greatest importance, it was still an influential post. Chrysostom came into office as a reformer, clamping down foremost on ecclesiastical extravagance and laxity, but also on vanity and luxury in general. Naturally, this made him numerous enemies in high places, though he also spoke up for the poor, giving him considerable popular support.

After a series of attempts to drive him out, Chrysostom was finally deposed in 404. He was exiled to rural eastern Anatolia, fell ill, and died a few years later. Declared a saint, his bones were returned to Constantinople in 438.

Chrysostom wasn't one of the Church's deep thinkers and was never much involved in abstract theoretical arguments. His gift was in preaching; hundreds of his sermons survive, explaining long passages of the Bible verse-by-verse in clear, vivid language. This made him a model for many later scholars and preachers; indeed, the form of everyday Orthodox ceremony is attributed to Chrysostom. He also set a hostile moralizing tone against many earthly pleasures and other religions. He set in motion the death of many aspects of classical culture in the Byzantine empire, such as the theater, and expressed a vicious anti-Semitism.

LEO THE MATHEMATICIAN (c. 790-c. 870)

Leo (or Leon) was born in western Greece to a prominent family of Armenian extraction, which eventually became more prominent still; in 837, his cousin of about the same age became the patriarch John the Grammarian, an iconoclast known for his extensive learning. Leo, though devout himself, was less dedicated to the Church and more dedicated to learning; he read a huge variety of ancient sources. He eventually settled in Constantinople to work as a teacher. He rose to prominence as a mathematician and philosopher, gaining a reputation as the smartest man in the empire and the honor of being able to teach at the Magnaura palace. He indicated iconoclastic leanings early in his career, which, along with his family connection to the patriarch, briefly won him a post as bishop of Thessalonica in 840. However, he appears to have switched sides as iconoclasm finally collapsed and was able to continue his career as teacher and friend of emperors.

The most practical of Leo's inventions was a system of beacons stretching from the Byzantine-Arab border in southeastern Anatolia to the capital, allowing news of Arab incursions to travel around 600 miles in the course of hours rather than the days required even by fast-horse relays. He may have been responsible for a similar system in Greece. His best-known inventions, however, were the automata at Magnaura: birds, lions, and other artificial animals made to act like living creatures. Leo's achievements draw a picture of Byzantine science as a derivative thing. Setting up an efficient set of beacons requires a working knowledge of the curvature of the Earth, which the ancient Greeks had, while the automata of Magnaura are described in terms similar to theatrical automata invented in the last few centuries B.C. However, while they may involve little that is truly novel, they do indicate a full and refined understanding of what came before.

KASSIA (c. 805-865)

Kassia was born into an aristocratic family in Constantinople. She grew to be both attractive and very well-educated. According to tradition, her attributes and connections were such that she was considered for marriage to a young bachelor who would, in 829, become the emperor Theophilos.

Perhaps to gauge her intellect, he remarked to her that the worst things in the world had come through a woman, a reference to Eve and original sin. Kassia rebutted by saying the *best* things in the world had come through a woman, a reference to Mary and the birth of Christ. Theophilos married someone else.

Although legend states that Theophilos later regretted not marrying Kassia, it was probably just as well. While Theophilos went on to briefly revive iconoclasm, Kassia eventually founded a convent in the western part of Constantinople, became its abbess, and spoke out as an ardent iconodule. She also became a prominent poet and musician. She produced a large body of religious verse, composed hymns, and performed her work in public to great acclaim, drawing large crowds to services where she sang. Though Kassia was oppressed and even tortured during this period, she outlived both Theophilos and iconoclasm. She was canonized after her death, and her works have become a traditional part of the liturgy of Holy Week.

If encountered, Kassia is a woman of striking appearance, definite opinions, and a sharp intelligence, but also significant compassion for the oppressed. She was suspected of hiding notorious iconodules from the emperor, so she might appear in adventures as a sort of Orthodox Harriet Tubman.

Adventure Seed: The Forest for the Trees

The automata are truly self-moving. Metal birds are roosting in the Magnaura palace and the Hagia Sophia, pecking anyone who happens by with needle-sharp beaks. Metal lions prowl the streets by night. Metal trees are growing beyond the Magnaura to make a bronze forest of the Augustaion. Leo has done his work too well, and now a metal plague threatens to consume the capital and perhaps the world. The PCs must find out what has gone wrong and how to stop it before it is too late.

ANNA COMNENA (1083-1153)

Any extended account of the emperor Alexius I would be incomplete without a mention of another woman who made a significant contribution to his place in history. Alexius, his doings, and a great deal about the Byzantine perspective on the First Crusade were documented in a substantial biography, the *Alexiad*, written by his daughter, Anna.

Anna, born in 1083, was well-educated and not inclined to accept obstacles to her considerable ambitions. For example, as a girl, she was forbidden to study ancient poetry because of its libidinous content, but she managed to read it secretly on her own. She also strongly resented her younger brother John's claim to the throne, regarding herself as the rightful heir. She plotted to usurp her brother's position after Alexius died, but her plot was unsuccessful. Her husband, the prominent nobleman Nikephoros Bryennios, refused to support her, and she was exiled to a convent. After Nikephoros died, she combined notes he had taken on recent history with her own recollections to compose the *Alexiad*, making her the first prominent female European historian.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAILY LIFE

Emile pushed his way closer to the table. “My lord,” he called out, “how did you get here?”

Gervais and Mikos, their faces gone ruddy from drink, looked up. Gervais indicated the nobleman, now in several layers of colorfully woven clothes, but at least not looking quite so much like a king. “This chap came by for some wine. I got across the idea that I wanted to get away from those monks for a bit. Looks like inns are the same all over!”

*The city offers exciting races,
fine dining, and lively conversation.*

“They certainly are,” Emile observed, frowning at a girl pouring wine at a nearby table and chatting familiarly with the men there.

“They even play . . .” Gervais gestured at an arrangement of stones on the table next to a small pile of coins. “. . . can’t make out what they call it, but it’s nine-man morris!”

“Is it, my lord?” Emile said, a bit frostily.

“Try some of the wine,” Gervais suggested. “That one tastes like turpentine, but this . . . what was it? Commandaria? I think it’s from an island. Fit for a king, it is.”

Life in the capital wasn’t all mutilation and theology. Constantinople was full of people to whom emperors and patriarchs were but distant figures at the center of a crowd. They had their own pursuits, interests, and amusements. These are some of them.

DOMESTIC LIFE

Though the Church informed most Byzantines’ aspirations for the future, the simple pleasures and obligations of home and family were the center of everyday routine.

HOMES

Not surprisingly, Byzantine homes bore a strong resemblance to Greek and Roman predecessors and Mediterranean homes in general. Residences were generally constructed as a set of rooms and walls around a central courtyard with limited access to the street. This provided a mix of privacy, ventilation, natural lighting, areas of shade throughout the day, and security.

Though almost all structures were approximately rectangular, many upper-class dwellings had a rotunda, apsidal room, or semi-circular courtyard. Where possible, houses were divided into a “public” section near the front door, where (usually male) guests might be received and entertained, and a “private” section in the back of the house where women were supposed to stay out of view.

During its most densely populated era around the reign of Justinian, the city held a number of Roman-style *insulae*, apartment blocks up to seven stories tall (the description of *insulae* in *GURPS Imperial Rome* is close). Despite the climb, upper-story apartments were apparently preferred, possibly for the view and to get away from the noise and dust of the streets. These largely vanished in the general decline of the seventh and eighth centuries. In later periods, poorer people lived in somewhat smaller *aulai*, common courtyards around which were arranged individual rooms or small groups of rooms. These might be a few stories tall, but smaller than the earlier towering blocks. Wealthier people in any period would live in an *oikos*, a complex of rooms up to three stories tall built

around a small central courtyard. Some even had their own grain mill. The line between *aulai* and *oikos* could be blurry. For example, an *oikos* could be converted into an *aulai* simply by subdividing it and renting or selling individual rooms.

Burglary was a significant problem in the densely populated city. Consequently, buildings had very few externally facing windows, and those typically only on upper stories. They also often had only one or two doors to the street, providing very controlled ingress. Street-level shops naturally had wide-open entrances, but almost never provided access to the rest of the building they were attached to.

Brick was the predominant material, with some stone used, particularly in houses that are more expensive. However, wood became much more common after the Fourth Crusade. Roofs were probably flat or lightly peaked. Though earthen tile was the preferred roofing material, some homes had wood or thatch instead. Between that and wooden structural members, large fires were a constant danger.

FAMILY AND NAMES

Most households in Constantinople were composed of a nuclear rather than extended family. That is, a home would contain a married couple and any unmarried children (two or perhaps three). Homes with more generations or more brothers, sisters, and assorted cousins and in-laws were relatively uncommon, particularly among the lower classes. However, close relationships with relatives were also the rule, with family members frequently visiting and taking an active interest in one another’s lives. Widowed parents might go to live with adult children, though retiring to a monastery was a popular option for those who could afford it.

While women were often in a subordinate position in families (though they had more rights than in Rome), a woman achieved a large measure of independence if she became a widow, gaining control of her husband's estate. One remarriage was allowed, but more were prohibited; the Church held that if someone lost two spouses, that was a divine sign that person really shouldn't be married.

Byzantine personal names were similar to modern Greek names with a strong lean toward biblical names. For further identification, the father's name might be included; for example, Stephanos Georgiou, or "Stephen, son of George." For broader use, an occupation, place of origin, or distinguishing feature might be used instead: Diogenes of Athens, Petros the Miller, Michael Psellos ("psellos" means "stutterer"). Family names as such were rarely used in the empire's earlier years, though they reemerged in the later Middle Ages.

CLOTHING

Like architecture, Byzantine clothing began with a Greco-Roman model. Most people wore tunics, knee- to ankle-length and often long-sleeved. In warmer weather, the hem of the tunic might be pulled up and tucked into a belt. In cooler weather, or simply to show off one's wealth, multiple layers of clothing might be worn, notably additional shorter tunics. Semicircular capes fastened at the shoulder were common. The lower classes regularly wore trousers under the tunic; they were rarely worn by the wealthy, who associated them with barbarians. Though men rarely wore headgear, women often wore a turban or other soft head covering, possibly including face-covering veils. Footgear for the lower and middle classes included practical sandals and ankle-length boots, while the wealthy would wear comfortable slippers.

Embroidered and elaborately woven patterned cloth was popular among the upper classes, while the poor made do with block printing and resist dyeing (a process of masking sections of fabric during parts of a multiple dyeing process to produce patterns of contrasting colors). Like their classical predecessors, the Byzantines were fond of vivid colors and elaborate patterns. Some colors, though, had specific meanings: Racing factions (p. 38) were associated with specific colors, and purple was reserved for the emperor.

FOOD

The Byzantine diet was similar to diets elsewhere in Europe: lots of grain in the form of breads and biscuit, supplemented by legumes (generally shipped in from the countryside), vegetables and herbs (often fresh from kitchen gardens), fish, meat, eggs, and cheese. (Biscuit was twice-baked, hard bread, soaked or cooked in liquid to soften it for eating.) Better bread was made from wheat, while the lower classes ate dense barley cakes. Most supplements to grain had a distinctly Mediterranean slant, including a great deal of seafood (fresh and preserved), olives and olive oil, nuts, and orchard fruits. Those who could afford them enjoyed lamb and beef. The Eastern Mediterranean is good country for sheep, and the city itself was quite wealthy, so the residents of Constantinople appear to have dined on more meat and cheese than other contemporary peoples, mostly mutton and sheep's-milk cheese. Pork was eaten, but regarded as somewhat lower class.

The Byzantines consumed a variety of drinks, including diluted, flavored vinegar as a summer refresher; and a version of *retsina*, wine spiced with pine resin, then as now very much an acquired taste. Countless variations on the popular Roman condiment *garum* (a fermented fish sauce, similar to modern *nam pla*) continued to be used regularly. The wealthy consumed exotic foods such as wild gazelle and imported spices, while the poor replaced meat with cheese, eggs, and nuts. The poor also ate a great deal of dried food, which didn't require sometimes-expensive firewood for cooking. Alternatively, they had cheap meals in tavernas (see *Other Amusements*, pp. 38-39). Rice was available perhaps as early as the 10th century, though it had to be imported at considerable cost. Sugar was available for import by the ninth century and produced in Byzantine territory, notably the island of Cyprus, by the 10th.

The Byzantines enjoyed a number of foods recognized these days as Greek. They were among the first in Europe to consume eggplant and citrus fruits in quantity. They probably first produced modern-style *dolma* (using grape leaves rather than fig leaves as classical Greek cooks had done), *moussaka*, and *keftedes* (seasoned meatballs bulked up with crushed grain; very popular through the eastern Mediterranean under a variety of similar names). Salads made from chopped, dressed vegetables were popular. The vegetables were typically lightly cooked but allowed to cool before serving; the prospect of eating raw vegetables would have been only somewhat less repulsive than the idea of eating raw meat. However, although the Byzantines enjoyed candied fruit made with honey or eventually sugar – a delicacy that is still popular in Greece – baklava and other flaky pastries currently attributed to Greek cuisine appear to be post-Byzantine inventions.

In the early days of the empire, classical manners were in use. By preference, diners reclined on couches around a table and ate with their hands. By the 12th century, however, sitting in chairs replaced lying on couches, and at least the wealthy started using forks along with earlier knives and spoons. (The Byzantines eventually exported fork use to the West.)

Predictably, religion had an impact on diet. The Orthodox calendar prescribed days of fasting of greater or lesser severity. For example, meat might be prohibited on some days, all animal products on others; other foods might be added on for special observances. As in the West, restrictions were particularly severe during Lent, but where the Catholic world had a tradition of Carnival feasts and processions leading up to it, most of the Orthodox world started fasting a few days early.

Cultural Familiarity

At the accession of Justinian, Eastern and Western Europe are at a significant point in the transition from Roman to separate Western and Orthodox civilizations. However, they're still quite similar, and at least at the beginning of the period, East and West are still in close contact with one another. Adventurers may take Cultural Familiarity (Orthodox) or Cultural Familiarity (Western), but someone with Cultural Familiarity (Orthodox) only suffers a -1 penalty to relevant skills in Western areas and vice versa. The penalty increases to -2 at the beginning of the ninth century and a full -3 in the mid-eleventh century, around the time of the "Great Schism" between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

LIFE OF THE MIND

Though perhaps not as intellectually creative as some prior periods, the Byzantine empire was a highly literate and, for its time, technologically advanced society. It also had a huge store of earlier wisdom and an active interest in certain scholarly areas. Constantinople was the center of a great deal of its intellectual activity.

EDUCATION AND LITERATURE

The empire had a much higher literacy rate than the rest of Europe. A rate of 30% for the empire as a whole has been suggested (better than most of 17th century Western Europe). With the capital's many merchants, officials, clergy, and wealthier-than-average residents, the rate would have been significantly higher there. Groups of parents often hired teachers to provide basic literacy instruction to their children in the home, with the Bible and Homer as common texts. Some went on to secondary education offered by the state or the Church. Particularly advanced students could get the equivalent of a university-level education from private teachers or small university-like schools. Constantinople also had a state-sponsored university, the *Pandisdakterion*, based in the Magnaura palace. The exact level of sponsorship varied with the fortunes of the empire, of course.

Without the printing press, producing a manuscript was no cheaper in the Byzantine empire than in the medieval West or anywhere else. Still, the sheer amount of wealth in the capital made books more common there. Small private libraries were somewhat common in the city, and the emperor, churches, and monasteries had their own collections.

Many of the texts found in these collections were more compact than in earlier years. By the time of Justinian, miniscule (lower-case) cursive writing had been developed. This was a break from the upper-case-only writing of the classical age. Miniscule was appropriate for private reading where a book was held close to the reader's eyes, as opposed to all-caps writing, which was more suitable for inscriptions and reading aloud from a lectern. The smaller form of writing was yet another development that led to lifestyles that were more solitary.

The Price of Literature

Using the book-production rules in *GURPS Low-Tech Companion 1* (p. 33), multiply a library's cost by 10 and weight by 4 for being handwritten. After the development of miniscule characters, books *could* be written as densely as a mechanically printed page, but they weren't always for a number of reasons, including legibility. A library handwritten entirely in miniscule is twice the weight and space of a printed library, but costs 15 times as much. A scribe *writing* in miniscule is at -3 to Artist (Calligraphy) or Professional Skill (Scribe).

Codices were in common use, though they were vellum, papyrus, or sometimes parchment early on, mostly moving over to paper later, with appropriate adjustments to weight and shelf space. Most volumes fell into two categories.

One was preserved classical texts – the great Greek philosophers, Roman legal texts, pagan epic poems, plays (though

drama in performance essentially vanished), and so on. The Byzantines had an ambiguous relationship with their pagan past. They actively preserved and proudly read a great many pre-Christian works, but a number of scholars who worked *too* hard on them sometimes had to defend themselves from charges of becoming pagans themselves.

The other category was religious literature – Bibles and excerpts from Bibles, collections of sermons, theological essays, and so on. This category formed the overwhelming majority of original Byzantine literature. *Hagiography* (biographies of saints) was an extremely important genre.

Additionally, the Byzantines wrote secular works. There were poems, satires, and a few very early novels. The most notable genre of popular literature was the “Akritic songs,” poems and stories about the warriors who guarded the empire's eastern frontiers. The best known was the epic of *Digenis Akritas*, which translates roughly as “border soldier of two peoples.” Basil, the soldier of the title, was the son of an Arab emir who converted to Christianity for the love of a Byzantine noblewoman. His story addresses his origins and his feats of strength and bravery during his career. He defeats bandits, fights various monsters ranging from wild animals to a dragon, sleeps with an Amazon queen, and eventually lives happily ever after. The epic favors plain, vivid language over sophisticated style, making it Byzantine pulp fiction after a fashion.

A large selection of histories and similar “nonfiction” works were likewise created. Authors around the imperial court produced useful manuals for governing, ranging from advice on generalship to foreign affairs to court protocol. For example, Maurice's *Strategikon* arguably sets out the first description of a combined arms strategy, noting how different types of troops can be used to support one another.

A great deal of formal Byzantine literature was written in a deliberately archaic style, recalling the Greek of either the great pagan philosophers and poets or the Church fathers of the first century or two after Christ. Although not a distinct language, it was notably different from the spoken language of the time, like someone in the modern-era writing English in emulation of Shakespeare and the King James Bible.

Meanwhile, contemporary language appeared in works aimed at general audiences, such as the Akritic songs and popular hagiographies. Someone learning to read Byzantine Greek may learn Literary Byzantine Greek or Contemporary Byzantine Greek. Each defaults to the other at one level of fluency lower. For example, someone who reads Literary Byzantine Greek at an accented level has broken fluency in Contemporary Byzantine Greek, and vice versa.

TECHNOLOGY

At least in its early years, the Byzantine empire was the most technologically advanced nation west of India, though in large part on the strength of retaining what its western neighbors had lost. It compared well with civilizations that were more distant.

The Byzantines were capable of producing large buildings with ambitious features, such as the Hagia Sophia (pp. 39-40) and its “floating” dome; and large works of civil engineering, such as the network of canals and aqueducts that supplied the capital with water. They also developed the pointed or broken arch as early as the sixth century, though they appear not to have used it extensively. (This was to become a vital element in Gothic architecture.) They had a highly developed industry for glass manufacture and related trades (see *The Arts*, p. 38). The Byzantines also retained a large body of medical knowledge, covering herbalism, surgery, and other medical practices.

The Byzantines sustained and developed the water power and hydraulic gear invented by their Greco-Roman ancestors. However, Constantinople lacked sufficient rivers and streams to harness significant water power within the city itself. Though canals and aqueducts can be used to power waterwheels, there appears to have been little effort to harness that energy in and around the city. While waterwheels were put to practical use in the countryside, hydraulics in the capital were used for elaborate displays, such as the throne room at Magnaura.

The early empire had a monopoly or near-monopoly on two technologies. One was silk production. According to tradition, silkworms were smuggled into the empire by a pair of monks during the reign of Justinian. Just as importantly, they brought information about how to cultivate silkworms and turn the cocoons into thread. The other was the incendiary Greek fire, invented around 670. Though useful in siege warfare, it gave the Byzantine fleet a particular advantage against other naval forces.

Byzantine technological superiority declined over time. Both the silk monopoly and the secret of Greek fire were lost no later than the Fourth Crusade. By the end of the Latin empire, if not significantly earlier, the empire was, technologically speaking, just one more country among others.

MAGIC

Like many peoples, the Byzantines had a lively belief in the supernatural, accepting the idea of friendly and malign spirits and their ability to mobilize magical forces in their own interests. One of the major concerns was avoiding the evil eye, a common Mediterranean conviction in the ability of the gaze of enemies to cause bad luck, infertility, disease, and other problems. To ward off this evil force, many people carried charms, such as brass

rings and small colored glass amulets inscribed with magical signs and formulas, as well as old coins. Coins minted under Alexander the Great, still in circulation as curios, were thought particularly effective. Such amulets were also used to protect a person's health, make childbirth less dangerous and painful, and otherwise ease everyday tasks and important life events.

It was thought that a few individuals could perform more powerful magic, such as averting natural disasters, withstanding extreme hardship, rapid or instantaneous travel, divination, and magical seduction. However, such abilities were only accessible by people of exceptional faith or those who partook of particularly dark magic.

A range of magical or otherwise supernaturally active items could be found around Constantinople. A statue of Aphrodite was said to be able to detect adulteresses by making their skirts blow up as they passed by (according to legend, it was removed by a *very* angry empress). A statue in the Hippodrome could indicate to arguing merchants when a fair bargain had been struck. Of course, a variety of supernatural abilities, notably healing and granting victory in battle, were attributed to relics and famous icons.

The perceived nature of magic changed over time. Early on, many regarded magical power as being held in people and objects. By the Crusades, however, magical theory had shifted to something more definitely Christian: “Good” miracles came from divine power through holy people and sacred objects, while “bad” magic ultimately came from demons and devils. This change was reflected in the form of amulets. Early in the empire, they might be inscribed with all manner of magical signs, whereas by the Crusades, they contained almost entirely Christian symbolism. Crosses, for example, came to replace most other amulets. Nonetheless, a sort of black market in black magic developed, where inscriptions on paper still contained non-Christian symbolism.

Emperors were not above manipulating the people's belief in magic and prophetic signs. For example, the emperor Leo IV, a prolific author, recommended that generals in the field fabricate omens and favorable astrological interpretations. This was intended as a means of improving morale by convincing the troops of upcoming victory. It is therefore deeply ironic that Leo gained a powerful reputation in later years as a magician and seer, whose philosophical works contained extensive prophecies.

Adventure Seed: Walk Through the Fire

The year is 717, and the newly crowned emperor Leo III has failed to conclude an alliance with the Bulgars to relieve the Arab siege of Constantinople. No assistance is coming, and a growing Arab navy has started to threaten Byzantine shipping. The PCs may be Byzantine soldiers, employees of an important official, or agents of an interested third party. They have been entrusted with a miraculous weapon from a dying engineer who assisted in the workshop of Kallinikos, the legendary inventor of Greek fire.

However, several obstacles lie in their path. First, they have to get past the blockade by sea or siege lines by land with a wagon heavily loaded with supplies. Second, they

have to get into the city; nobody knows they're coming, so why should the defenders let them in? Third, they have to assemble and use the device. There are directions, but they're written in code to prevent them from use in the wrong hands. Besides, the PCs aren't sure what the device is. Explosive bombs that can rain deadly shrapnel on the enemy while terrifying them with smoke, fire, and a clap of thunder? A high-pressure Greek fire siphon with a range of 100 yards or more? An invulnerable automaton fueled by fire and steam, which can crush any invaders? They may have the ultimate weapon, but no idea how to use it.

SPECTACLES AND AMUSEMENTS

Generally, the answer to the question “what do you do for a good time in Constantinople?” was “not much.” However, the city had a few recreations.

THE ARTS

Byzantine music sounded like something between Western European music of its time and the music of the Muslim world. Secular music might include harps, drums, valveless horns, flutes, and some bowed instruments. For unsurprisingly theological reasons, most liturgical music was *a capella*. Choral music in the Church resembled Gregorian chant. It was monophonic, with a single melodic line sung by a soloist or the entire choir. By the middle years of the empire, Byzantine chant came to include an *ison*, a sort of droning bass line. The resonance makes a Byzantine choir sound a bit like the vocal equivalent of a bagpipe or sitar. Byzantine music also made use of quarter-tones and other fractional tones, giving it a distinctly “Eastern” sound.

Musical notation consisted of a scheme of diacritical marks written along with a text to be chanted or sung. The marks indicated a starting note, where and how far to raise or lower tones, and where and how long to hold notes. Over time, this notation became sufficiently elaborate that only skilled professional musicians could effectively use it. Musicians may buy a Sight Reading (Byzantine Notation) technique for any musical skill (*GURPS Low-Tech Companion 1*, p. 19).

Where there is music, there is often dance, and the Byzantine empire was no exception. Dance performances by professionals were another amusement of antiquity that faded away through the Middle Ages, though they probably did not die out entirely. Dances were also a part of both public and private celebrations. Public dancing was typically segregated by sex. Line dances and circle dances were popular, likely resembling modern Greek and Middle Eastern folk dances.

The visual arts were, not surprisingly, often loaded with religious significance. Icons, usually painted on thin wooden planks, were present just about everywhere, save during the years of iconoclasm. (During that time, many artworks were destroyed, and most of the remainder kept hidden.) Illuminated manuscripts similar to those in the West were also produced. Encaustic painting was frequently used in the early years of the empire, but it was mostly supplanted by tempera well before the Crusades (see *GURPS Low-Tech Companion 3*, p. 31). At least partly for religious reasons, sculpture was not a major Byzantine art, but relief carving was still practiced. Carved ivory was particularly well-developed.

Glass formed the basis of some of the empire’s most memorable art. At least up to the Fourth Crusade, the Byzantines continued to work in mosaic, making glass tesserae in a wide range of colors, even laminating gold leaf between thin layers of glass for particularly rich artworks. The Byzantines also developed advanced techniques for enameled metalwork, notably in the century or two before the First Crusade. Combining glass with fluxes and metallic oxides for color, they produced elaborate, colorful decoration for personal items and architectural fixtures.

CHARIOT RACING

Although many ancient sports vanished during the Byzantine period, chariot racing remained a popular sport. (Theodosius I put an end to the Olympics, and gladiatorial contests faded away by the reign of Justinian.) Typically, races involved two- or four-horse chariots, racing individually or in teams of two or three vehicles where the team with the first chariot to do a certain number of laps won. As in modern vehicle racing, participants contended for better positions, but the team element complicated strategy, letting some members of the team try to block opponents while another simply tried to get ahead.

Racing was glamorous but extremely dangerous. Colliding with an opponent was technically prohibited but nevertheless common. Fast and lightweight chariots could easily overturn and spill their drivers to be dragged and trampled, particularly on turns. Rowdy fans sometimes hurl rocks and even nail-spiked missiles at opposing teams.

Partisan spectators were a notable part of chariot racing. When the Hippodrome was constructed, the city didn’t just bring in professional racing. It inherited a culture of sports fandom present across the Roman world. Most charioteers belonged to teams identified by the colors they wore, and which their fans adopted – originally white, red, green, and blue. (The first two of these colors had vanished by the time of Justinian.) These teams had large, avid followings, which took on more than mere fannish interests. They were sometimes used as a mouthpiece for political and even theological causes, although they usually expressed populist dissatisfaction with the status quo rather than consistent ideological or policy stances.

Racing was immensely popular in the early days of the empire and was still enjoyed up to the Fourth Crusade. However, it declined through the period under attacks from Christian writers. The influence of the fans declined with it.

Re-Creating the Races

Though gladiatorial games faded away over the Byzantine period, some of the organization of such games was very similar to that of chariot racing. Many of the supporting roles in *GURPS Martial Arts: Gladiators* (p. 32) are suitable to charioteering: animal handlers, harenii, musicians, physicians, and referees could be found working around the Hippodrome. The charioteers themselves may resemble the gladiator template (*Gladiators*, p. 28), but with Driver (Chariot), Games (Byzantine Chariot Racing), and more DX replacing Games (Roman Gladiator) and any points spent on a gladiator combat style.

OTHER AMUSEMENTS

Despite efforts by the Church to stamp it out, gambling was no less widespread in Constantinople than in any other society. In addition to chariot racing, wrestling and foot races survived as spectator sports and provided fodder for wagering.

Common games involved dice and variants of backgammon and dominoes. Games involving pure skill were played as well. Six-sided dice were reasonably common. Checkers and nine-man-morris (popular across Medieval Europe) were well-known, with chess appearing around the Crusades. Game boards might be portable or scratched into benches and tables when convenient.

People in search of a good time in Constantinople would probably end up most often in the city's many tavernas, which were almost stereotypical bar/restaurant establishments. Often open late into the night, public houses provided inexpensive meals and cheap wine to the masses. They also served as gathering places for those people who didn't have anywhere

better to go, though they rarely provided lodging. Such spots might also host small musical, dance, and mime performances, the shrunken remnant of ancient theatrical traditions. Prostitution was frowned on but legal, to the point where the *Corpus Juris Civilis* exempted women working in tavernas from prosecution for adultery, such services being regarded as a traditional and legitimate part of the business.

Nevertheless, Constantinople was very light on public recreations, particularly for a city of its size. Byzantine society had a strong tendency to look inward. Reading quietly on one's own replaced the classical custom of reading aloud to others, and personal celebrations were usually held privately in the home with relatives rather than in public spaces.

NOTABLE LOCATIONS

Aside from the palaces of emperors and other notables, the city was full of grand landmarks that dominated the everyday landscape.

*Of the [Hagia Sophia] I
can only describe the exterior,
for I did not see its interior.*

– Ibn Battuta

THE WALL

In its finished state, the wall started by the emperor Theodosius II was the most formidable fortification of the Middle Ages. Though the city fell to attackers a few times during the next thousand years, it did so due to treachery or rupture of the lesser sea walls. The Theodosian wall itself would not be breached by force until confronted with weaponry of the early Renaissance.

The wall was a complex set of defenses. Going from the outside in, there were a dry moat at least 20' deep and 60' across; a terrace of similar width raised 6' above ground level on the opposite side of the ditch; an outer wall 26' high with a thickness of 6'; 45' of open space behind the outer wall; and a 40' inner wall behind that. Narrow causeways crossed the moat at intervals; these provided at least a theoretical capability for sections of the moat to be flooded. The outer wall had nearly 100 small square or pentagonal towers that were only a few feet taller than the wall itself. The inner wall had a similar number of towers reaching as high as 65'. Several towers in the outer wall had posterns, through which small bodies of troops could enter and exit, while the inner towers were typically fitted with a variety of siege engines. Fortress-like gatehouses and drawbridges protected roads leading to the wall's nine gates.

All of these taken together provided frightening defense in depth. Approaching attackers would be slowed by the ditch and the raised terrace beyond, which likewise made it difficult

to bring up heavy equipment such as battering rams. If the attackers did manage to scale the outer wall, the defenses of the flanking towers would prevent them from sweeping along the parapet. The attackers would still be exposed to fire from the monumentally large inner wall.

HAGIA SOPHIA

As the wealthy capital of an enthusiastically Christian empire, Constantinople was naturally loaded with churches. Any number of them were large and well-decorated enough to serve as the central house of worship for any city of its day, but none was more grand than the Hagia Sophia.

The structure that stood through most of the Middle Ages and to the current day is actually the third church of that name on that same site. The first was built in the middle of the fourth century. It was replaced by a slightly larger version in the early fifth century. That church burned down in the Nika riots, leaving the way clear for Justinian to put up the biggest church the world had ever seen. Indeed, it was the largest church anyone *would* see until the Renaissance. It was, in certain ways, the template for sacred architecture for *two* religions. The building's scope was an important influence on the scale of cathedrals of the Gothic period, while the domed structure had a significant effect on the design of many mosques.

The floor plan of the brick and stone structure is close to square, about 80 by 90 yards, divided into three aisles by rows of columns. At the center of the church, among the rows of columns, are four massive stone piers describing the corners of a square about 100' on each side. A huge dome, with its top 180' above the floor, rests on top of the columns. Scallop-shaped windows surround its base, letting light into the center of the church and making it appear as if it is floating in space unsupported.

The side aisles are divided into two levels: a ground level with a ceiling over 50' high and a gallery above it. The main dome is surrounded by much smaller half-domes, one on each of the church's four sides (the towers now at the church's corners were a later Turkish addition). The whole structure is lavishly decorated with stone columns, facings of marble and porphyry, a 50' silver iconostasis, and extensive mosaics ranging from simple geometrical motifs to elaborate scenes involving emperors and a variety of holy persons.

The central dome is decorated with a grand image of Christ looking down on the world below. Less decorated areas of the church grew more ornate over time as successive donors installed new works of art.

The Hagia Sophia was home to the patriarch of Constantinople and the preferred venue for religious ceremonies involving the emperor. This made it the central church of Orthodox Christendom, a major tourist attraction, and generally a very busy place. It was also a factor in a number of political disputes. Those fearing persecution, notably rivals of the emperor, could flee to the church and claim sanctuary. They could do so at any church, really, but claiming sanctuary at the Hagia Sophia was a very visible public act, making it politically very difficult (though not impossible) for the authorities to do anything to the person seeking protection. It could be a last-ditch effort for someone involved in high-level intrigues, but it was often a useful means of buying time and public sympathy while allies negotiated a settlement or gathered their own forces.

Language Differences

“Hagia Sophia” is sometimes mistranslated as “Saint Sophia,” since *hagia/hagios*, meaning “sacred” or “blessed,” is the usual epithet applied to saints. In most cases, that’s suitable. (For example, *Hagios Stephanos* does in fact mean “Saint Stephen.”) In this case, “Sophia,” which means “wisdom” or “knowledge,” is meant quite literally – the church is named for sacred wisdom. This fact confuses modern tourists, and it may have puzzled historical visitors as well and baffled attempts to find icons of a holy woman named Sophia.

THE PALACE

When speaking of “the palace,” most people really meant the palace *district*. The palace was a set of residences, workshops, reception areas, pleasure gardens, and other facilities that was home not just to the emperor, but in many ways to the imperial administration. The palace covered a large area on the southeastern shore of the city. The northern section of the palace was a more public area. A visitor entered at the *Chalke*, a grand ceremonial gateway and vestibule opposite the *milion* at the *Augustaion*. It was topped with gilded tiles and lavishly decorated with mosaics and statues. Barracks for several of the imperial bodyguard units were nearby. The official apartments of the imperial family were farther south (attached to the imperial box at the Hippodrome), along with courtyards; a variety of workshops for luxury goods such as jewelry and high-grade silks; dining and reception rooms of varying levels of decoration and formality; and so on.

The palace expanded over time. To the south, it gained the *Chrysotriklinos* shortly after Justinian’s reign, a huge octagonal throne room used for the largest and grandest receptions. That and other construction knit the palace together with the slightly older *Bucoleon* palace on the city’s southern shore. This residence had, among other things, a private walled harbor and a special purple-stone-faced building, the *Porphyros*, in which select empresses gave birth. Slightly later, it also

absorbed the legendary *Magnaaura*. By at least the middle period of the empire, multiple palaces had become favored residences, notably at *Blachernae*. During difficult periods, parts of the palace went out of use and were allowed to decay. However, the district remained a center of administration and important ceremonies even if the emperor was no longer in full-time residence.

THE HIPPODROME

Originally constructed in 203, the Hippodrome was perhaps Constantinople’s most persistent remnant of antiquity, both by itself and in its incorporation of a range of older sculptures and monuments. This ancient race track was shaped like an elongated U, about 490 yards long by 143 yards wide, with the open end facing northeast. Stone seats with an estimated capacity of 100,000 lined the track. A shaded colonnade along the top of the seating sections adorned the area. A two-story private box for the emperor, the *Kathisma*, was located half-way along the long southeastern side. The track was decorated with an array of remarkable objects that was impressive even by Constantinople’s standards. These included an Egyptian obelisk dating to around 1500 B.C., a serpent-shaped column made in celebration of the Greek victory over the Persians at *Platea* in 479 B.C., and a variety of other statues ranging from classical survivals to contemporary memorials of famous charioteers. Among the best known are four Greek or Roman bronze statues of horses. (These were looted during the Fourth Crusade and taken to Venice, where they are now prominently displayed at the *San Marco*.)

Though its primary purpose was chariot-racing, the Hippodrome served as an all-purpose public venue. Plays were performed there until drama fell out of fashion, and other athletic events were held there. It also served as a place where the emperor could address the people, or the populace could acclaim a new emperor. Though it definitely became worse for wear during some periods, it was in use for almost all of the Roman and Byzantine periods and was even maintained by the Ottomans at least into the 18th century.

BASILICA CISTERN

Several emperors built reservoirs to supply the city’s needs for water. Most of the largest ones, found near the western end of the city, were simply sizable, deep pools. Some others, notably a few closer to the city’s east end, were completely enclosed. The largest was Justinian’s *Basilica cistern*, located a little to the northwest of the palace. It was an underground structure, 150 by 70 yards, with a 30’ ceiling. When completely full, the structure could contain in excess of 21 million gallons of water. What made this structure particularly striking was not its overall dimensions but its internal support. Like many other large stone structures of its day, the vaulted ceiling was supported by vast rows of stone columns, in this case placed five or six yards apart from one another. When partially full, someone could take a small boat and row across it as though it was a vast flooded cathedral. (Indeed, many modern tourists did this until walkways were recently installed).

CHAPTER SIX

CAMPAIGNS

“Leg, he is good now?” Mikos asked in broken French.

“A little stiff,” Gervais confirmed, “I’ll feel it when the weather turns, but good enough to fight on.” When he saw Mikos smiling blankly, he drew his sword, swung it this way and that, and said, “Leg is good.”

Mikos’s smile grew to something more heartfelt, and he drew his own sword as he guided Gervais in the direction of a large, iron-bound door that several servants were attacking methodically with crowbars. The sound echoed along the broad aisles and domed ceiling of the deserted church along with the rattle of their mail.

“No fear,” Gervais said, “We’ve the power of Christ and two good knights. What could stand against us?”

“I would most sincerely not wish to learn,” Emile managed.

The servants called out to Mikos, who signaled them to pause. He nodded at Gervais, who clapped Emile on the shoulder and took his sword in a two-handed grip. Mikos signaled the servants for one final blow. The doors flew open with a thunderous noise. Emile shouted a prayer in Latin as Mikos and Gervais charged the erupting demon.

Constantinople may be used in a number of ways. For example, it can be dropped as-is into a purely fact-based campaign, or with minor modifications into a fantasy-tinged but mostly historical campaign. With names changed and a few extra features grafted on, it could appear in a pseudo-medieval fantasy campaign. Of course, the precise usage requires particular considerations depending on the genre and the tone of the campaign.

CONSTANTINOPLE AS HOME

Constantinople approaches the Platonic ideal of a location for political scheming and social climbing. Complex plots and dark intrigues are practically named after the empire! Up to the last few decades before the Fourth Crusade, sufficient social mobility makes the idea of starting out as nothing and moving up to high offices, even the imperial throne, feasible. Justin I and Basil I are both inspirational examples. It can also be the site of more “street-level” urban adventuring, with PCs taking the roles of a criminal gang or of police officials and watchmen tasked with keeping people safe.

It can serve simply as a home and base of operations. Despite periods of civil unrest, it’s a fairly safe place to live; that is, although street crime is a problem for the poor, as it is in any city, the residents of Constantinople were rarely subject to invasion. Internal conflicts involved one would-be ruler trying to depose another rather than wholesale murder and looting. Housing to fit any budget can be found, and necessities and luxuries are available in quantity. There’s no end of Patrons and Contacts to get briefings and support from before heading out on adventures. Protagonists could be diplomats, spies, or other agents of the powerful, taking

orders from the palace and resting up in their own luxury oikos before heading out for more missions.

CONSTANTINOPLE AS DESTINATION

Whether or not one would want to live there, Constantinople is a great place to visit. It is *the* place to go in medieval Christendom for lost knowledge, the finest and most expensive luxury goods, sacred relics, and so on, whether they are to be obtained legitimately or otherwise. (It’s also not a bad place for anyone seeking information who’s coming out of the Dar al-Islam.) For people from the Slavic and Scandinavian North and Catholic West, it’s an impressive and exotic location, but still accessible. For people from the Muslim south and east, it’s an opponent, but a respectable and civilized one that can be dealt with diplomatically with rather than just fight, unlike the barbarous Franks.

However, a traveler does not simply walk into Constantinople. Or rather, *one* may, but a larger group may have issues. Depending on patronage, affiliation with allied powers, or other prior arrangements, visitors (particularly those from outside the empire) may be required to enter the city unarmed and in small groups. Advantages such as Patron and Claim to Hospitality are useful for regular foreign travelers to the city. Tour guides are available for hire, though. In fact, a number of visitors strongly recommended them, opining that there was no way a foreigner could find his way around the vast city without one. Just navigating side streets may be a small adventure in itself.

THE MORAL DIMENSION

Another aspect to consider is whether Constantinople is a good or bad place. In the West, the Byzantine empire has long had a reputation as an evil empire – if not actively *evil*, then at least cruel, perverse, decadent, and in a constant state of decline. Passing over for the moment the improbable marvel of spending over a thousand years in decline, many Westerners saw a lot to dislike in the Byzantine empire. The Crusaders viewed the Byzantines as a bit slippery at best and at times downright treacherous. Early Crusaders cited the empire’s perceived lack of promised support and their willingness to deal peacefully with infidels. (This was a constant problem for new arrivals from Europe, though Crusaders who settled down in the Holy Land came to adopt similar attitudes when they realized that the Muslims wouldn’t simply go away.) Constant religious disputes couldn’t have helped, and blaming the Byzantines for treachery certainly would have allowed Westerners to justify keeping newly taken land for themselves.

Later scholars noticed the Crusaders' characterizations of the Byzantine empire, and were likewise horrified at the constant descriptions of blindings, dismemberments, and other gruesome items of the empire's history. To them, Constantinople was the black heart of a corrupt society.

This is in stark contrast to how the Byzantines themselves and many other Orthodox (and many other early Christians, depending on the period) saw the city. To them, Constantinople was a downright sacred place. It was the global capital of Christendom, stuffed to bursting with churches, monasteries, and holy relics. As if that weren't enough, the

impregnability of its defenses were, to them, an obvious sign of divine favor. After all, if God didn't regard Constantinople as a special place, why would he preserve it?

In play, the city could easily be either, neither (that is, just another city without unusual moral gifts or turpitude), or *both* (possibly with a corrupt political establishment kept in check by a sacred nature). Regardless of the facts on the ground, visitors and residents alike will have their own feelings on the subject, and may reach very different conclusions about the same things.

CROSSOVERS

Constantinople can play a starring role in a range of campaign types, and can be dropped into campaigns based on a variety of other **GURPS** supplements.

*I and many of my
position never believed
that they were really
two human beings,
but evil demons.*

*– Procopius,
Secret History*

BANESTORM

The city of Megalos, capital of the empire of the same name, bears more than a passing resemblance to Constantinople, particularly Constantinople around the Crusades. Both are the capitals of large, autocratic, Christian, TL3 realms suspected to be ripe for a fall. Both are port cities that have multiple sets of defensive walls. Both have populations in the hundreds of thousands. Both are capitals of multi-ethnic empires (though Megalos' ethnic picture is further complicated by the presence of multiple species). Both have rulers with bodyguard units made from racial or ethnic minorities. Indeed, Megalos' imperial palace is even just inside a recently built set of walls, just like the Blachernae palace. A GM wanting to add more detail to Megalos could lift many physical features of Constantinople with little or no modification. Names might be changed from Greek to something more Latinate, as Yrth's humans lean toward Western languages. In addition, Megalos won't have remnants of classical culture. However, perhaps the city is home to pre-human sculptures and architectural elements filling that particular slot.

Of course, many of the social aspects are different. Notably, the Church on Yrth is different from the Orthodox Church, and attitudes toward magic are entirely different. However, a bit of Justinianic-era gossip is accurate on Yrth: In one of his more petulant moods, the historian Procopius accused the emperor of being a demon in human form. In Procopius' case, it was politically motivated hyperbole. In Megalos, it's true.

CRUSADES

Just about any campaign that relates to the Crusades is likely to pass through Constantinople at some point. The city was a particularly notable and dazzling stop for Westerners on their way to the Holy Land. It was an especially important destination during the First Crusade, when Alexius Comnenus embarked on his campaign of rapid-fire diplomacy with the major Western lords.

Though the empire was less directly involved with the Crusades once the Western lords started establishing their own domains, Constantinople was still an important stop, representing the last major secure outpost of Christendom before entering the war zone. (Crusaders sometimes bypassed it by sailing directly to the Holy Land from Italian ports.) The empire's involvement could also be a significant strategic issue. Byzantine armies saved King Fulk in the 1130s, while Byzantine recalcitrance (and covert cooperation with Saladin) slowed Frederick Barbarosa during the early days of the Third Crusade.

Whatever the situation, relevant participants that might be found in Constantinople include:

- French, German, and English travelers of all sorts (lords, knights, men-at-arms, clergy, religious pilgrims, and their servants).
- Byzantine soldiers and functionaries trying to win back old territory while keeping their erstwhile allies at arm's length.
- Muslim diplomats trying to reach a separate peace with the Byzantines and shut off the flow of Frankish troops to the Levant.
- Italian merchants, whose increasing interest in the East leads them to trading enclaves in the easternmost safe port available to them.
- Russians and Scandinavians may become involved directly in the Crusades, or appear as Varangian Guards or simply merchants who have come to take advantage of increased commerce.

Several additional books can be very useful here. *GURPS Arabian Nights*, *GURPS Middle Ages 1*, *GURPS Russia*, and *GURPS Vikings* all give snapshots of related regions around the time of the Crusades and can build up both an international picture and international sets of characters.

DUNGEON FANTASY

In addition to being something close to the ultimate town, Constantinople provides numerous opportunities for employment and adventure for *Dungeon Fantasy* characters. Fighters may look for employment in the imperial tagma. To qualify for the Varangians, being a dangerous-looking stranger who just rolled into town is downright advantageous. Intellectuals have numerous rare texts to track down. The city's tall buildings, crowded markets, and twisted back streets give ample scope for thieves, while its convoluted politics may provide endless employment for ninja. Bards and innkeepers are in their natural element in a densely populated city.

Dungeon-like locations in the city are surely full of monsters and treasure in a *Dungeon Fantasy* campaign. The vast underground cisterns provide an eerie setting for hunting aquatic monsters. The various palace complexes might shelter pesky Things Man Was Not Meant To Know, possibly summoned by decadent dabblers in magical arts who should know better but don't really care. Older churches and monasteries might be subject to hauntings. Even if gladiatorial combat has been outlawed (which, in a *Dungeon Fantasy* world, seems unlikely), adventurers might try their hand at racing chariots in the Hippodrome pulled by teams of giant lizards, dire wolves, and other exotic and dangerous beasts.

FANTASY-TECH

Constantinople is an outstanding location for historical weird science. It brought together both an overwhelming amount of classical scholarship to survive to the Middle Ages, and enough money and interest to do something about it. Byzantine sages demonstrated a thorough understanding of the pioneering work of their ancestors. If anyone were to attempt to reproduce the weapons of Archimedes or the wings of Daedalus, it would be them. Indeed, the automata of the Magnaura palace and Greek fire are themselves close to real-world weird science. Various existing technologies might be combined and refined. Industrial-scale rutways might span the Anatolian plains. Steam- or water-driven war engines might take the battlefield. Crude internal combustion engines based on igniting tiny sprays of Greek fire and other noisy, clanking devices might mechanize Byzantine society before the rest of the world is ready for it. Moreover, if petroleum becomes the fuel of choice, it could kick off oil crises a millennium early and make the Crusades that much more complicated.

The Byzantines were also close enough to the Muslim world that they could notice innovations there. There were also wealthy and advanced enough to have a good shot at duplicating contemporary developments from the East. Nonetheless, they might not want to. For example, although some Byzantines worked in astrology, the Church frowned on it; it wasn't regarded as respectable a discipline as it was farther east. This might lead to a technology gap between the two civilizations:

Byzantine scholars and engineers try to recover devices only hinted at in their classical sources, while Muslim astrological advisors cast horoscope after horoscope in an attempt to predict their Orthodox rivals' next move.

Live in the Now

Like Rome (and Damascus, Jerusalem, Cairo, and several others), Constantinople is an eternal city, with large chunks of antiquity surviving to the present day. The Hagia Sophia, converted to a mosque for several centuries, is now a museum. A number of other Byzantine structures – such as the Basilica cistern, the Aqueduct of Valens, and parts of the Theodosian wall – are preserved as historical monuments and tourist attractions. Those and other parts of the past may poke through into the present for more contemporary adventures.

Trivially, these preserved locations may serve as backdrops for modern adventures. Maps, pictures, and detailed descriptions of the Hagia Sophia in particular are readily available. More interestingly, Byzantine topics may arise to complicate things for today's adventurers. In a campaign with ancient conspiracies, the dense, complex symbolism of Byzantine plotters would make the Templars look like they were standing on street corners and handing out pamphlets explaining their plans. Likewise, many opportunities exist for ancient horrors to become known. The accumulated trauma of centuries of horrific mutilations may have caused zones of intense psychic disturbance or led to hauntings by legions of particularly distressed ghosts. Trapped demons may have been held back for over a thousand years by Byzantine talismans that have now been disturbed or destroyed; only similar devices can trap them again.

HORROR

A campaign set in Constantinople has a lot of scope for supernatural horror. Most residents believed in the evil eye, an effect that grants considerable power to people purely because of maliciousness. Combined with the subtlety of Byzantine politics or simply the crowded streets of the city, adventurers face hidden threats not just to their position, but to their well-being, and no poisons or daggers will give away their true enemies. Those who might seem too eager to intentionally cultivate the ability to curse people at a glance might be reminded of its drawbacks: The evil eye can be indiscriminate, harming occasionally vexing allies as well as enemies. Truly good and holy authorities have access to powerful countermeasures. Worse, its use qualifies as witchcraft, punishable by death.

There was also a widespread belief in the existence of devils and potentially harmful powers contained in pagan relics. While the power of Christ and various relics could counteract such powers, it's certainly reasonable to limit their use to the truly faithful, a category into which most PCs won't fall.

Constantinople has room for purely mundane terror. Byzantine politics and criminal justice – with its blindings, dismemberments, and other mutilations – presents the possibility of body-horror themes. Likewise, given frequent anxiety that the end of the world was approaching, it's easy to imagine a scenario where regular society breaks down in the face of a feared apocalypse. Will the wicked, convinced that they have no hope of heaven, decide to go out in one last great burst of sin?

Will the righteous feel compelled to cleanse the world of those not as pure as themselves? Even if the evil eye doesn't actually exist, belief in it may lead to adventurers being accused of witchcraft (a capital crime) if harm comes to their rivals.

INFINITE WORLDS

The Byzantine empire was the remnant of orderly civilization in Europe during the early Middle Ages. It kept the very idea of European civilization from vanishing under waves of barbarians and rival civilizations alike. Constantinople was the lynchpin of the empire, making it potentially a major player in alternate histories. A weaker Byzantine empire during the early years might fall to Germanic invaders, much as the western part of the empire did. The Balkans and Near East would be left a complex of Gothic-influenced successor states reaching equilibrium with a Persian empire trying to expand to the west. Without the empire holding the eastern end of Europe, Islam might spread into Europe from the east rather than going the long way around through North Africa and into Spain before petering out in southern France. Alternatively, a cascade of minor changes coming from the collapse of the empire might head off the development of Islam. Depending on the specific course of history, Mohammed might not be born, or Islam could rise less explosively in a stronger, more settled Persian empire much as Christianity developed within the Roman empire.

A more powerful empire, meanwhile, could shift the course of Europe's post-Dark Age recovery in an entirely different direction. If Justinian had more skilled successors, if Heraclius were up to the challenge of defending his southern territories, or if the early years of Islam didn't involve political and military as well as religious expansion, Byzantine gains could be solidified and serve as the basis for more sustained expansion. From a Mediterranean core, the revived empire reestablishes Roman rule (though partly Hellenized and thoroughly Christianized) across Europe and the Near East. It also brings the continent to the same level of technology and sophistication as the Renaissance at least 500 years earlier, if not more. It could shift the development of Christianity away from Roman Catholicism and toward Orthodoxy, possibly radically altering or preventing the Protestant Reformation.

In either case, given the strength of the central government, the easiest way to influence the empire as a whole is to do it in Constantinople itself. An assassination here, a potential favorite aided there, even the placement of a few bureaucrats with just the right skills and motivations could put the empire on a much better or worse footing, depending on the inclinations of the agents in question.

Centrum

Centrum is probably conflicted about the Byzantines. On one hand, they're the closest thing the region has to an orderly state. On the other, Byzantine thought is profoundly, even stubbornly, religious and mystical. Centrum may have factions that disagree about what to do about the Byzantine empire in worlds where it's in play, which other crosstime players may be able to take advantage of.

MARTIAL ARTS

Where there's fighting, there are martial arts, and Constantinople was around long enough to see a *lot* of fighting. A great many warriors passed through its gates. Quite a few tried to breach them.

Though *Armatura* might be available during the empire's earliest years, it had been replaced by Sword-and-Shield Fighting as the dominant style of swordplay by the time of Justinian. Since long spears were the primary infantry weapons for Byzantine armies, footmen would also have used styles similar to Heroic Spear Fighting, *Hoplomachia*, and Viking Spear Fighting, with Foot Archery for some infantry. *Armatura Equestris* was the dominant fighting style among Byzantine cavalry well into the Crusades. Wrestling survived as both sport and combat discipline, so Combat Wrestling, something resembling Greco-Roman Wrestling, and possibly even descendants of *Pakration* are available.

In addition to native styles, given the vast number of foreign mercenaries, traveling Crusaders, East European and West Asian attackers, and merchants and pilgrims of every stripe, Constantinople eventually saw representatives of just about every fighting style practiced from Scandinavia and the British Isles through the whole of Europe and the Near East into Persia and possibly as far east as India. These would have included any number of variations on *Furusiyya*, the latest version of Knightly Mounted Combat, and *Sword-and-Buckler Play*. Viking Spear Fighting would be suitable for Russians and Vikings, particularly with *Axe/Mace* or *Broadsword* taken from the optional skills. The Byzantines often faced, and were strongly influenced by, horsed archers from central Asia, so styles resembling *Bajitsu* and *Kyujutsu* would be well-known (see *Archery*, *GURPS Martial Arts*, p. 181, for particular considerations). In short, if there's a medieval way of beating people up devised west of the Ganges and north of the Sudan, it'll probably be found in or around Constantinople.

THAUMATOLOGY

Constantinople is an obvious choice as a repository of mystical knowledge for any fantasy-flavored campaign (hidden works by Leo IV "the Wise" would be a great prize for any magician). It's equally possible to construct a more specifically Byzantine-flavored type of magic. By the empire's middle period, the Byzantines considered benevolent supernatural forces as usually a matter of divine intervention. They came either because of a person's virtuousness and piety winning divine favor, or by using amulets and relics (see *Material Magic* in *GURPS Thaumatology*, pp. 95-120). Malevolent supernatural

forces were a consequence of negotiation with Satan and other demons or of force of personality (notably when it comes to the evil eye, which often requires no conscious effort to inflict malign effects on another; see *GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 201). Only rarely were magical effects the result of the deliberate working of spells. The supernaturally powerful become so because of who they are or who they deal with rather than what they know.

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*You wanna brush up
on your Greek, Jamison.
Well, get a Greek and brush
up on him.*

*– Groucho Marx,
Animal Crackers*

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