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Judith Herrin: Byzantium

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I

The City of Constantine

Constantine resolved to make the city a home fit for an emperor . . . He surrounded it with a wall . . . cutting off the whole isthmus from sea to sea. He built a palace scarcely inferior to the one in Rome. He decorated the Hippodrome most beautifully, incorporating the temple of the Dioscuri in it.

Zosimus, New History, c. 501

Byzantium–Constantinople–Istanbul is one of the most extraordinary natural sites. Like New York, Sydney and Hong Kong, it is a great metropolis with a deep-water harbour which brings the sea into the heart of the city. The proximity of water, the play of sunlight on the waves and views out towards the horizon create a very special quality of light. What attracted Constantine when he looked for a new capital for the Roman Empire in the early fourth century AD was a location from which he could control land and sea routes between Asia and Europe. He found a suitable site with a safe harbour on the Golden Horn, which could be sealed by a chain to keep out enemy ships and provide security from the dangerous currents of the Bosphoros. Where Leander of Greek myth is supposed to have swum the strait to woo his beloved Hero, Russian tankers now dominate, but even though modern Istanbul is a city of 12 million, the panorama of Constantinople on the Bosphoros remains magnificent. Until recently it was possible to rent a small boat and be rowed across to the historic wooden houses built with landing stages in Ottoman times. And although there are now two bridges joining Asia and Europe, passenger ferries continue to cross the Bosphoros, offering glasses of black

BYZANTIUM

tea and *semits*, rings of baked dough coated with sesame. On a fine day it is one of the great pleasures of life in Istanbul to sit on deck and enjoy a splendid view of Constantine's city.

Born in the central Balkans at Niš, Constantine was the son of Emperor Constantius Chlorus, one of the four rulers established by Diocletian (284–305), in an attempt to provide a much-needed element of stability in the vast Roman world. The Tetrarchy, 'rule of four', effectively divided the empire into two halves, ruled by two emperors acting in concert, with two junior colleagues who would succeed to full power on their death. It faltered due to the ambitions of sons of emperors who were denied a role. Constantine manifested this very problem after his father's death at York in 306, when he was acclaimed emperor by his troops. Yet he was not recognized by Licinius, the senior emperor in the East, and a few years later there were three different military leaders each claiming the imperial title in the West. Moving south from England, Constantine fought and defeated the others, and then in 312 confronted Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge just outside Rome. After this decisive victory Constantine entered the eternal city in triumph, where he was acclaimed by the Senate but declined to thank the gods for his success at the Altar of Victory in the expected fashion. Later he said that he had seen a vision of the Cross in the sky, which he interpreted as a sign from the God of the Christians, who promised him victory. He had made himself Emperor of the West by military conquest and now had to negotiate with Licinius, Emperor of the East.

The two rulers met at Milan in 313 and consolidated their joint administration by marriage alliances which united the empire. They also decided to issue an Edict of Toleration, which proclaimed that all religions could be celebrated freely, including Christianity, so long as adherents of every god prayed for the well-being of the Roman Empire and the emperors. Ever since, Christians have prayed for the well-being of their monarchs. Whatever Constantine's personal beliefs (see below), in 313 he had taken a step towards making the faith the official religion of the empire and consistently favoured the Christians. Intense rivalry between the two rulers was only resolved eleven years later when Constantine defeated Licinius at Chrysopolis on the Asiatic side of the Bosphoros. He took his rival prisoner, exiled him to

THE CITY OF CONSTANTINE

Thessalonike and treacherously had him assassinated. In this way in 324 Constantine became ruler of the greater, richer and more populated East as well as the West. He had ridden and fought across the length and breadth of the Roman world, which he ruled for another thirteen years until his death in 337.

After his victory over Licinius, Constantine decided that the empire needed a capital in the East, closer to its most serious rival, Persia, which regularly threatened to invade. The ancient city of Troy was considered. Instead, Constantine chose the colony established by Greeks from Megara, supposedly in the seventh century BC, on the European shore of the Bosphoros. From this mythical origin Byzantion had flourished, controlling shipping through the treacherous waters that link the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara, which in turn flows into the Aegean at the Dardanelles.

Byzantion was built on an elevation and had a well-protected harbour on the Golden Horn. Since the sea bordered it on three sides, to the north (the Golden Horn), the east (Bosphoros) and the south (Sea of Marmara), the only fortification required to enclose the city was a wall in the west. In addition, Byzantion commanded the routes for the lucrative sea-borne transport of goods from the far north (amber, furs, metal and wood) and from the Mediterranean (oil, grain, papyrus, flax, and spices imported from the Far East), as well as overland trade between the West and Asia. In the late third century, Emperor Septimius Severus had strengthened its walls, which were always a weak point, and added new monuments.

Constantine transformed Byzantion into a new capital with his own name in the same way that Hadrian founded Hadrianopolis (Adrianople) and Alexander the Great Alexandria. In traditional ceremonies performed in 324, a line was ploughed to mark out the new land walls, which quadrupled the extent of the city and maximized the potential of the site, enclosing an area of approximately eight square kilometres, as Zosimus describes. Gates in the western wall and along the Marmara and Golden Horn were laid out. After six years of intensive construction, the city of Constantine, Constantinople, was inaugurated on 11 May 330 with ceremonies redolent of ancient civic pride and urban festivals. Horse and chariot races, the favourite sport of all Romans, were held in the Hippodrome; the

BYZANTIUM

new baths of Zeuxippos were opened for public use; and foodstuffs, clothing and money were distributed to the inhabitants. Those privileged to live in the new capital adopted the name Byzantine, to indicate their affinity with the ancient colony of Byzantion, and to distinguish themselves as its true citizens.

The city of Constantine drew into its centre the great trading routes, both naval and overland, that meet at the deep-water channel separating Europe from Asia. Unlike the Greek colony of Chrysopolis on the Asian side of the Bosphoros, it was protected by its physical setting on an elevated rocky peninsula. One great advantage of being almost surrounded by water was that the western wall stretching across the peninsula enclosed a large amount of land by a relatively short line of fortification. Furthermore, it was harder for the defenders to be taken by surprise by a land attack. It required a regular water supply that was assured by long aqueducts and cisterns for collecting rainwater. With easy access to fertile hinterlands and rich fishing grounds, Constantinople also became a natural fortress exceptionally difficult to storm.

Even with these natural advantages, the decisive element in the city's defence was always its inhabitants, their institutions, culture and organization created within the walls. From the beginning, Constantinople was also called New Rome. In imitation of Old Rome, it was laid out with fourteen regions and seven hills, linked by wide avenues leading from the centre to the gates in the western wall. Its squares were decorated with ancient sculptures collected from all parts of the empire. On its acropolis overlooking the Bosphoros there were two temples dedicated to Rhea, the mother of the gods, and to Fortuna Romae (the Fortune of Rome). In the central Forum of Constantine stood a dramatic porphyry column made of drums of purple stone brought from Egypt. At the top, a pagan statue of Apollo was adapted to represent the emperor. Works of art decorated the porticoes around this circular public space, which had triumphal arches at east and west marking entry to the Mese (the main thoroughfare).

Constantine brought sculptures from all parts of the empire to embellish his new capital, including the Serpent Column dedicated after the Greek victory over the Persians at Plataea (479 BC) from Delphi, and an Egyptian obelisk from Karnak celebrating a much

earlier triumph. The Hippodrome became an open-air museum adorned with protecting, symbolic and victorious Greco-Roman images. Statues of pagan gods (Zeus, Heracles), wild and fantastic animals, and rulers including Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Augustus, and of Rome, in the form of the wolf with Romulus and Remus, vied with trophies of military victory. Four ancient bronze horses were set up above the starting gates at the entrance to inspire competitors and spectators alike in the ancient skills of the races (plate 30). With broad thoroughfares linking the regions, each bordered by colonnades in which shopkeepers and craftsmen established their trades, the new capital was constructed to impress.

In his city Constantine minted the solidus (in Greek, *nomisma*), which he had introduced in the West in 309. It was a new type of 24-carat gold coin, which became the most reliable currency of Late Antiquity and the Byzantine world. Until the early eleventh century, all emperors minted gold coins of comparable fineness and quality, maintaining a stable standard for over seven hundred years, an extraordinary achievement (plate 22). Since personifications of Rome and of Victory had often been represented on imperial coins, Constantine adapted this type using the Tyche (Good Luck, Fortuna) of Constantinople. She appears as a woman enthroned, wearing a crown of battlements to represent the city walls, and holding a cornucopia to represent its wealth, an allegory in female form of male power, elucidated by Marina Warner. Imperial coinage minted in Constantinople brought the symbol of the new capital into wide circulation. Gradually Christian symbols replaced the ancient ones: the Cross is used for the first time in the sixth century and a portrait of Christ in the late seventh (plate 11a). After the seventh century, the *nomisma* became the only gold available in the Middle Ages and was highly prized in regions which minted silver. Byzantine gold coins have been excavated in Scandinavia, western Europe, Russia, Persia and Ceylon.

In founding his New Rome, Constantine I brought many of the features of Old Rome on the Tiber to the Bosphoros. He granted land and privileges to senatorial families who agreed to move east and set up a new Senate of Constantinople. Entitlement to a supply of free bread was linked to the construction of new housing. Those who built accommodation in New Rome were granted bread tokens, which

allowed them to collect fresh bread daily at points in all the fourteen regions of the city. Grain silos and water cisterns were constructed to ensure the city's supplies. In 359, a prefect was appointed to take charge of the city on the model of Rome, and all imperial administration was concentrated there. Duplicating the Roman pattern of 'bread and circuses' (see chapter 3), Constantine completed construction of the Hippodrome and appointed professional entertainers (the circus factions or demes) to organize the races and spectacles so much enjoyed in ancient times.

From 330 until his death in 337, Constantine continued to campaign against hostile forces in the East, moving from palace to palace, rather than residing permanently in Constantinople. After his initial victory at Rome, he only returned once to the ancient capital, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his accession (315), when he dedicated the New Basilica and his Victory Arch, which still dominates the Forum. His new foundation grew at the expense of Old Rome and that of other cities previously used as imperial residences: Trier, Nikomedeia, favoured by Diocletian, Sirmium on the Danube or Antioch on the border of modern Turkey and Syria. Although many senatorial families remained in the West, Constantinople attracted craftsmen, architects, merchants and adventurers, while the new court needed educated men to sing the praises of the new Christian emperors as well as to run the administration. Lacking a traditional caste of established families who cherished their genealogies in the Roman style, Constantinople was more open to talent; newcomers who proved successful were rapidly promoted. This social mobility meant that the city experienced a less pronounced divide between aristocrats and plebians, although upstarts were always mocked and slaves continued to be beaten.

The nature and degree of Constantine's commitment to Christianity is disputed: his biographer Eusebius (Bishop of Caesarea, 313–c. 340) emphasizes it above all else, while secular historians record his devotion to the unconquered sun, Sol Invictus, shared with his father. In the late fifth century, Zosimus blames Constantine for all the ills of the Roman Empire, claiming that he abandoned his ancestral religion (of the pagan gods), because 'a certain Egyptian assured him that the Christian religion was able to absolve him from guilt . . .'.

The historian also reports why the emperor felt so guilty: Constantine had killed his son Crispus on suspicion of improper relations with Empress Fausta, his stepmother. Constantine later shut her up in an overheated bath until she died. He was indeed baptized into the new faith but only when he was dying. This was not uncommon as Christians wanted to avoid sinning after baptism, so the ceremony was regularly postponed till the last possible moment.

Different versions of the story of his vision of the Cross before the battle of the Milvian Bridge suggest that it is a myth, although Christian authors later claim it as the moment of his conversion. At Rome during the winter of 312/13, however, Constantine instructed the governor of Carthage to return Christian possessions, which had been confiscated during a recent persecution, to the local bishop and to provide compensation if the objects had been sold or melted down. This implies a definite shift from the previous imperial view of Christianity as a force capable of corrupting military strength, as well as denying due reverence for the ancient gods and emperors.

While Constantine supported Christian leaders and funded the building of Christian churches, his sons also permitted the construction of a temple in Italy dedicated to the cult of the imperial family, complete with priests dedicated to sacrifice in the old pagan style. At the same time, some temples appear to have been forced to give up their statues and any precious metal was stripped from their doors or roofs. The sacrificial element of pagan cult was gradually restricted; the killing of animals was to be replaced by the bloodless sacrifice offered to the Christian God. Since many pagan philosophers had also stressed the need for a spiritual understanding of 'sacrifice', this cannot be considered an exclusively Christian restraint. It indicates nonetheless the gradual demise of animal sacrifice, the central act of pagan cult. So whether he was converted by the vision of 312, or only when he knew that he was dying in 337, Constantine spent most of his adult life as a patron of Christianity, supporting the previously persecuted communities; he endowed their grand new churches with liturgical objects of precious metal set with jewels, and tried to help them define their faith more closely.

It is not clear how many new religious buildings within Constantinople were built by Constantine. He probably planned the church of

BYZANTIUM

the Holy Apostles, to which the imperial mausoleum was attached, the cathedral church of St Irene and churches dedicated to the cults of two local martyrs, Mokios and Akakios. Outside his capital Constantine paid particular attention to the sites associated with Christ's life on earth, sending his mother Helena to the Holy Land in 326. In the course of the first imperial pilgrimage, she founded the churches at Bethlehem over the manger of the Nativity and at Jerusalem over the tomb near Golgotha, where she is said to have discovered the True Cross. She also distributed money to the troops, which may have been the primary reason for her journey. Helena set a pattern for later pilgrimage, which was facilitated by building hostels and hospitals. In 335, Constantine himself followed in her steps; he dedicated another shrine to the Saviour and attended a council in Jerusalem, before celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of his rule.

In a decisive shift from the Roman tradition of imperial cremation, however, Constantine was buried according to Christian rites in the mausoleum designed to house relics of the twelve Apostles. The emperor wished to be laid to rest among Christ's chosen disciples; Eusebius describes him as equal to the Apostles and the thirteenth, though the emperor's own perception suggests that he considered himself superior to them. Constantine's son, Constantius II, completed the church of the Holy Apostles and moved what were believed to be the bones of Saints Timothy, Luke and Andrew to the site in 356/7. Subsequent rulers added to an impressive collection of relics: the veil, girdle and shroud of the Virgin deposited in her shrine at Blachernai became particularly important. Emperors paid annual visits to these relics and to the mausoleum where they censed the tombs, lit candles and said prayers for their predecessors. Ceremonies such as these consolidated the notion of an unbroken line of Christian rulers established by Constantine.

Through a naming system which became prevalent in Byzantium and complicates its history, numerous later emperors were also called Constantine, eleven in all. It was common for the first male child of a marriage to be named after his paternal grandfather, which accounts for some of these Constantines. Others were acclaimed as a New Constantine, as if to stress their equality with the founder of Byzantium, or added Constantine to their given name, like Herakleios-

THE CITY OF CONSTANTINE

Constantine in the early seventh century. In addition to the eleven Constantines, there are eight emperor Michaels, eight Johns and six Leos. They are listed at the end of this book in an effort to distinguish them by date and achievement. None, however, really challenged the enduring position of the first Constantine.

Gradually, the cult of this great emperor and his pious mother, Helena, developed into a model of Christian rule. Legendary accounts of their devotion effaced Constantine's involvement in the murders of his son and his second wife, and his mother's obscure origins. A key moment occurred in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon, when Marcian and Pulcheria, the ruling emperor and empress, were acclaimed as 'a new Constantine and a new Helena'. Marcian was also compared to Paul and David, while Pulcheria was said to have shown the faith and zeal of Helena. The courtiers and secular officials who stage-managed these acclamations no doubt saw the importance of so elevating their fifth-century masters. In the process they also contributed to the transformation of the founder of Constantinople and his mother into saints of the Christian Church, and this is how they appear in later medieval stories and frescoes, where they are often shown flanking the True Cross.