

For centuries, the city of Constantinople was the eastern capital of the Roman Empire. Now called Istanbul and located in the modern-day country of Turkey, this fascinating place continues to reveal important aspects of the Roman Empire. By studying the history of Constantinople, we can see the many ways that the Roman Empire, and its religion, changed.

### **From Greek to Roman**

Constantinople was originally called Byzantium. It was built on the Bosphorus Strait, a narrow waterway that separates Asia and Europe. Its location has always made the city important in terms of trade. Byzantium was founded in approximately 657 BCE by Byzus, a Greek ruler. It is likely that Byzus built his city with structures dedicated to Greek gods and used Greek styles of architecture, but we unfortunately do not know those details today. That's because the Roman emperor Septimius Severus completely destroyed the city in 196 CE. Septimius Severus rebuilt the city using Roman building methods, including walls made of a core of rubble and concrete and then lined with brick. The buildings also included other distinctly Roman architectural styles, such as the arch and the dome. Along with changing the style of architecture, Septimius Severus also changed the name of the city to Augustus Antonina. During this time, the city was filled with references to the Roman gods, like Poseidon and Artemis.

### **Making a “New Rome”**

The Roman emperor Constantine, who ruled from 306 to 337 CE, wanted to establish a “New Rome” in the eastern part of the empire. He chose Byzantium for its importance in both trade and in military defense. Like Rome, Byzantium was surrounded by seven hills, but the city was too small for his vision of an eastern capital. So in May 330, he walked outside of the existing city walls to mark new boundaries for a larger city.

Constantine named his new city New Rome. However, people still called it Byzantium. In fact, coins were still stamped with the name Byzantium. Later, Constantine's New Rome was renamed Constantinople, but people still called it Byzantium. This soon changed when Constantine ordered the money to be stamped with the word Constantinople instead.



A section of the ancient walls of Constantinople in Turkey.

Constantine may have struggled to successfully change the name of the city, but he did succeed at changing the city in many other ways. He improved the harbor to increase trade. He built many new buildings and hired artists to create huge statues of himself. One statue was a carving of Constantine's head that stood about 125 feet tall. Constantine built an impressive palace for himself located near the hippodrome, or horse racing stadium. Perhaps his most notable change to Constantinople was converting it to Christian city.

### **Building a Christian City**

You might wonder how a city can be a Christian city. Isn't a city just a city, full of streets, buildings, and people? While that is true, cities can also reflect the values and beliefs of the people who live there. For example, cultures that place a high value on warfare might build a city with walls and fields for practicing battle. Constantine was the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity, and he made sure his religious beliefs were reflected in the city.



An interior view of Hagia Sophia at Istanbul. The building was altered by five damaging earthquakes between 553 and 986 but still retained some of its original structure.

Constantine built many buildings in Constantinople. His legacy of construction was carried on by the emperors who ruled after him. These Christian emperors enlarged Constantine's original buildings and also built their own. By the 400s, the city likely had about 250,000 occupants and 14 large churches. After riots in the 500s damaged the Hagia Sophia, Emperor Justinian had it rebuilt. Two architects, 100 master builders, and 10,000 laborers worked on the building, which was completed in only five years.

### **An Ever-Changing City**

From the time it was founded, Constantinople has been continually changing. In the 1400s, the city was conquered by the Turks and became part of the Ottoman Empire. As a sign of how the city has changed throughout its history, many of the once-Christian churches are now used as mosques. Mosques are Muslim places of worship.

Today, the city is still a bustling, vibrant metropolis. Though the name has changed again—to Istanbul—pieces of the Roman history remain. Unfortunately, many parts of Roman history remain hidden, buried under the current city of Istanbul. Archaeologists have not been able to conduct extensive excavations in Constantinople, because the site is still in use as a modern city. Who knows what secrets remain to be discovered some day?

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Why don't modern historians know details about the city that Byzus founded?
  - A. The city was destroyed by an earthquake.
  - B. The conquering Romans completely destroyed the city.
  - C. Byzus hid all of the city records and history books.
  - D. The current city is in a different location.
2. Why was it necessary for Justinian to rebuild the Hagia Sophia?
  - A. He wanted to make it bigger and grander.
  - B. It was destroyed by an earthquake.
  - C. It was damaged during riots.
  - D. His wife asked him to rebuild it.
3. Why have there been so few archaeological excavations of Constantinople?
  - A. For a long time, no one knew where the city was located.
  - B. The site of Constantinople is occupied by a modern city.
  - C. Many people believed the city was only a legend, and not a real city.
  - D. The walls around the city prevented anyone from entering it.
4. Cities often reflect the beliefs of their inhabitants. In what ways has Constantinople represented the beliefs of the people who lived there? Provide evidence from the passage to support your answer.