



INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the Byzantine monuments of Istanbul, the city known to the Greeks as Constantinople, the ancient Byzantium. Constantinople was, for more than a thousand years, capital of the Byzantine Empire, which in its earlier period, from the fourth to the sixth century, was synonymous with the Roman Empire. During those centuries, the religion of the empire changed from pagan to Christian and its language from Latin to Greek, giving rise to the culture that in later times was called Byzantine, from the ancient name of its capital. As the great churchman Gennadius was to say in the mid-fifteenth century, when the empire had come to an end, “Though I am a Hellene by speech yet I would never say that I was a Hellene, for I do not believe as Hellenes believe. I should like to take my name from my faith, and if anyone asks me what I am, I answer, ‘A Christian.’ Though my father dwelt in Thessaly, I do not call myself a Thessalian, but a Byzantine, for I am of Byzantium.”¹

The surviving Byzantine monuments of Istanbul include more than a score of churches, most notably Hagia Sophia. Other extant monuments include the great land walls of the city and fragments of its sea walls; the remains of two or three palaces; a fortified port; three commemorative columns and the base of a fourth; two huge subterranean cisterns and several smaller ones; three enormous reservoirs; an aqueduct; a number of fragmentary ruins; and part of the Hippodrome, the city’s oldest monument and the only one that can surely be assigned to ancient Byzantium. Other remnants are preserved in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, particularly in the galleries devoted to *Istanbul through the Ages* and *Byzantium and Its Neighbors*. Still more are preserved on a deeper level in the city itself, for the streets and squares of Istanbul are built on those of medieval Constantinople and even, in some cases, of ancient Byzantium.

The monuments are described in chronological order as the history of the city unfolds. The first chapter is devoted to the ancient city of Byzantium, and the second describes the events that led Constantine the Great to shift his capital from Rome to Byzantium, which he rebuilt to create the new city of Constantinople in A.D. 330. The next five chapters follow the development of the city during the late Roman era, which can be said to end with the reign of Justinian I (r. 527–65), when the empire reached its peak. Subsequent chapters give an

account of the empire's sharp decline in the medieval era, its slow recovery during the rule of the Macedonian and Comnenus dynasties, its near downfall in the Latin occupation of 1204–61, and the final two centuries of Byzantine Constantinople under the Palaeologus emperors, when Byzantium flourished in a last renaissance before its fall to the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Mehmet II in 1453.

The ups and downs of the empire are reflected in the architectural history of the city, particularly that of its churches. The oldest, St. John of Studios, is a classical Roman basilica, the type used for the first purpose-built churches in the fourth and fifth centuries. The churches of Justinian's reign – SS. Sergius and Bacchus, Hagia Sophia, and Hagia Eirene – belong to an extraordinary period of prolific and fruitful experiment in architectural forms, as if the architects were searching for new modes of expression for a new age. The decline of the empire in the medieval era is evidenced by an apparent total absence of building activity, for there are no extant churches in the city erected in the three centuries between the reigns of Justinian and Basil I (r. 867–86), founder of the Macedonian dynasty. That was also the time of the iconoclastic movement, when virtually all of the religious images in the churches of the city were destroyed. Iconoclasm ended a quarter of a century before the rise of the Macedonian dynasty, the beginning of the so-called Middle Byzantine period, when new churches were built and decorated with figurative mosaics. The churches of this period, including the years of the Comnenus dynasty, were smaller than those of earlier times and of a new type, the so-called cross-domed church. Such churches were also built in the Palaeologan revival after the Latin occupation. The dating of churches in the Middle and Late Byzantine periods is often difficult, particularly since most of them have been rebuilt on several occasions, though structures of the Palaeologan era can usually be distinguished by their highly decorative stonework. The Palaeologan era also produced the extraordinary mosaics and frescoes in the Church of Christ in Chora, the current Kariye Camii museum, the supreme achievement of the last Byzantine renaissance.

Throughout the book, the monuments of the city are described in the context of their times – as part of the interrelated political, religious, social, economic, intellectual, and artistic developments that occurred during the principal dynasties that came to power over the long turbulent history of the Byzantine Empire. The monuments that they founded stand today as a major part of the architectural and artistic heritage of Byzantium, a link between the ancient Graeco-Roman world and the new worlds of Renaissance Europe and the Ottoman Empire.



BYZANTIUM

Istanbul is the only city in the world that stands astride two continents. It spreads across the southern end of the Bosphorus, the historic strait that connects the Black Sea, the Greek Pontus Euxinus, and the Sea of Marmara, known in antiquity as the Propontis, and thus separates Europe from Asia. The city is further divided on its European side by the Golden Horn, the Greek Chrysokeras, a scimitar-shaped inlet fed at its upper end by two streams known as the Sweet Waters of Europe, the Greek Cydaros and Barbyzes. The historian Procopius, writing in the mid-sixth century A.D., described the city as “surrounded by a garland of waters,”¹ an encomium that could still be applied to modern Istanbul despite the ravages of time.

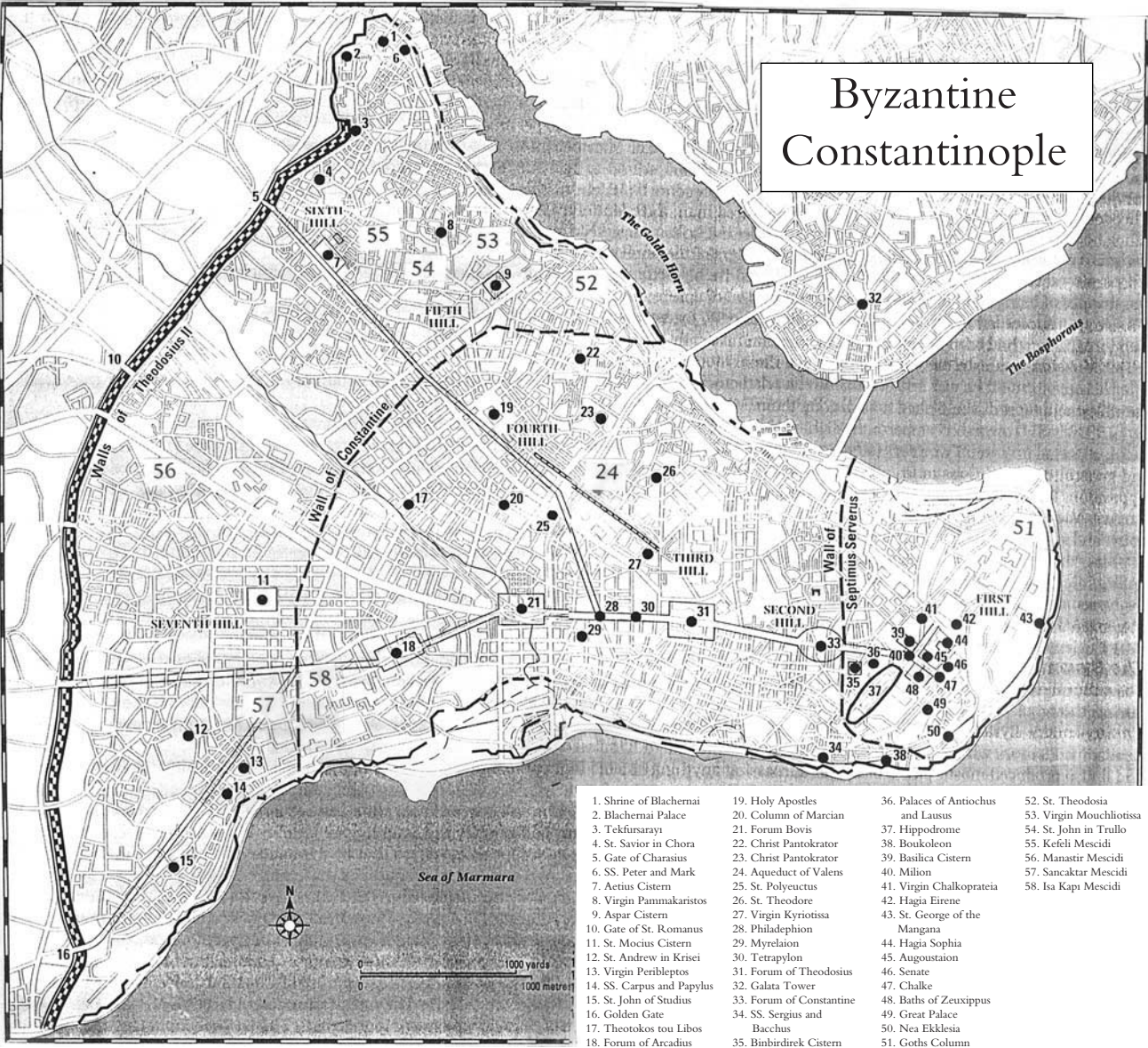
Byzantine Constantinople was built on a roughly triangular peninsula that forms the southeasternmost extension of Europe. The Byzantine city was bounded on the north by the Golden Horn, on the south by the Marmara, and on the west by the land walls built in A.D. 447 by Theodosius II in the final expansion of late Roman Constantinople, which was later enclosed by defense walls on its seaward sides as well (Figs. 1, 2).

The periphery of the defense circuit was more than 20 kilometers, measuring 5.3 kilometers along the sea walls of the Golden Horn, 7 kilometers along the Theodosian Walls, and 20 kilometers along the Marmara sea walls. The area enclosed by the Byzantine walls includes seven hills, six of them rising from the ridge that parallels the Golden Horn and the other forming two peaks in the southwestern sector of the city above the Marmara. The French antiquarian Pierre Gilles (Petrus Gyllius), writing in the mid-sixteenth century, used these seven hills as landmarks in his pioneering study of the topography of the Byzantine city. He identified the First Hill as the eminence at the tip of the Constantinopolitan peninsula, numbered the next five hills in succession along the Golden Horn ridge, and referred to the twin-peaked hill to the southwest above the Marmara as the Seventh Hill (Fig. 3).

The original periphery of the peninsula was originally smaller. Its current size is due to the filling in of the bays and Byzantine harbors on both the Golden Horn and the Marmara as well as the shallows outside the sea walls. As Cyril Mango has shown, there were originally two shallow but deeply indented bays,



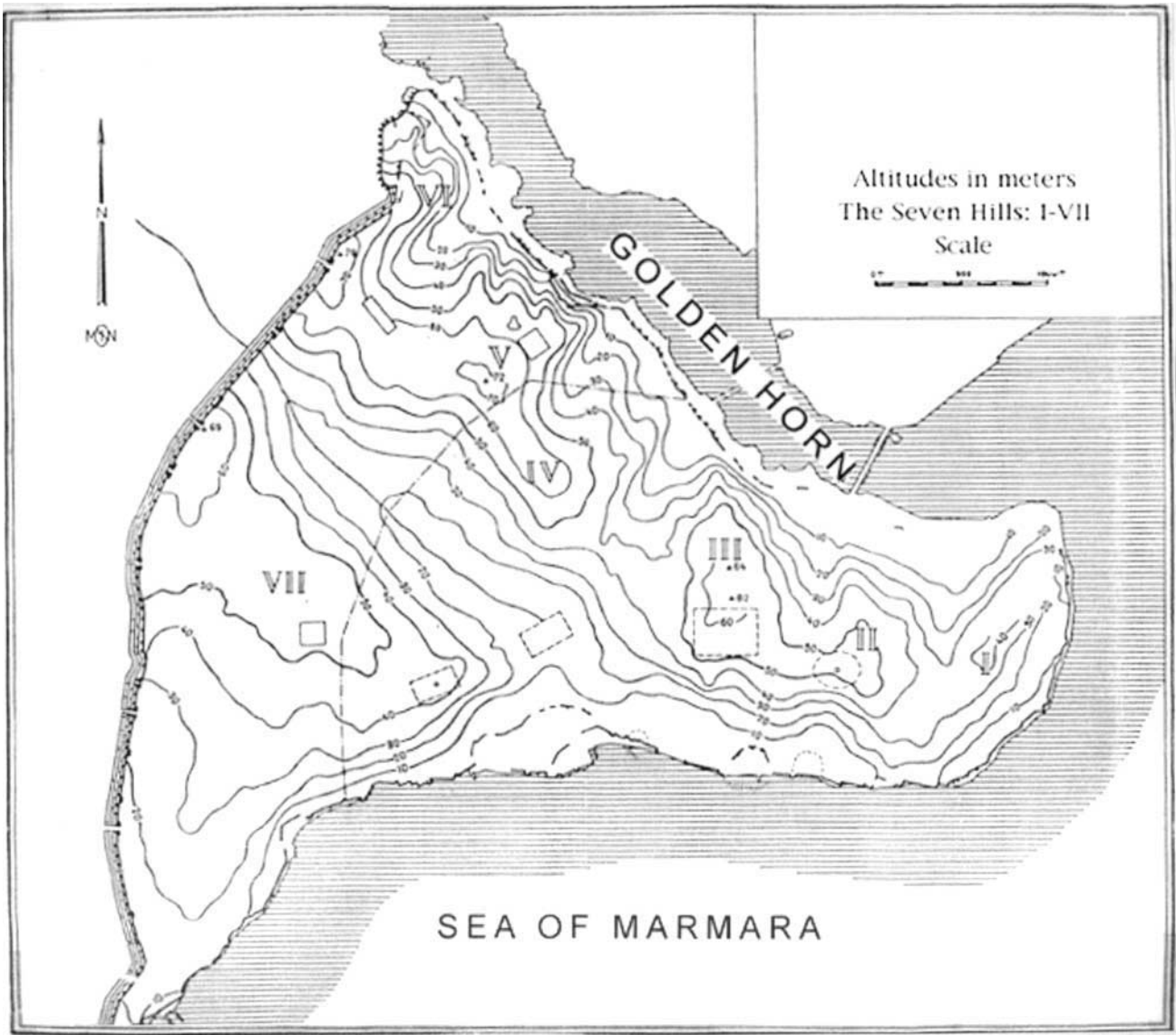
1a (top). The Byzantine World (after Rodley). 1b (bottom). Byzantium and its surroundings (after Maclagan)



2. Byzantine Constantinople, showing Byzantine sites and the main streets of the modern city (after Freely)

one on the Golden Horn between the Third and Fourth Hills, and the other due south on the Marmara, about a kilometer inside the Theodosian walls. An isthmus about a kilometer wide separated the inner ends of the two bays, linking the eastern and western parts of the bifurcated peninsula. Both bays were eventually filled in, probably beginning with the founding of Constantinople by Constantine the Great in A.D. 330.

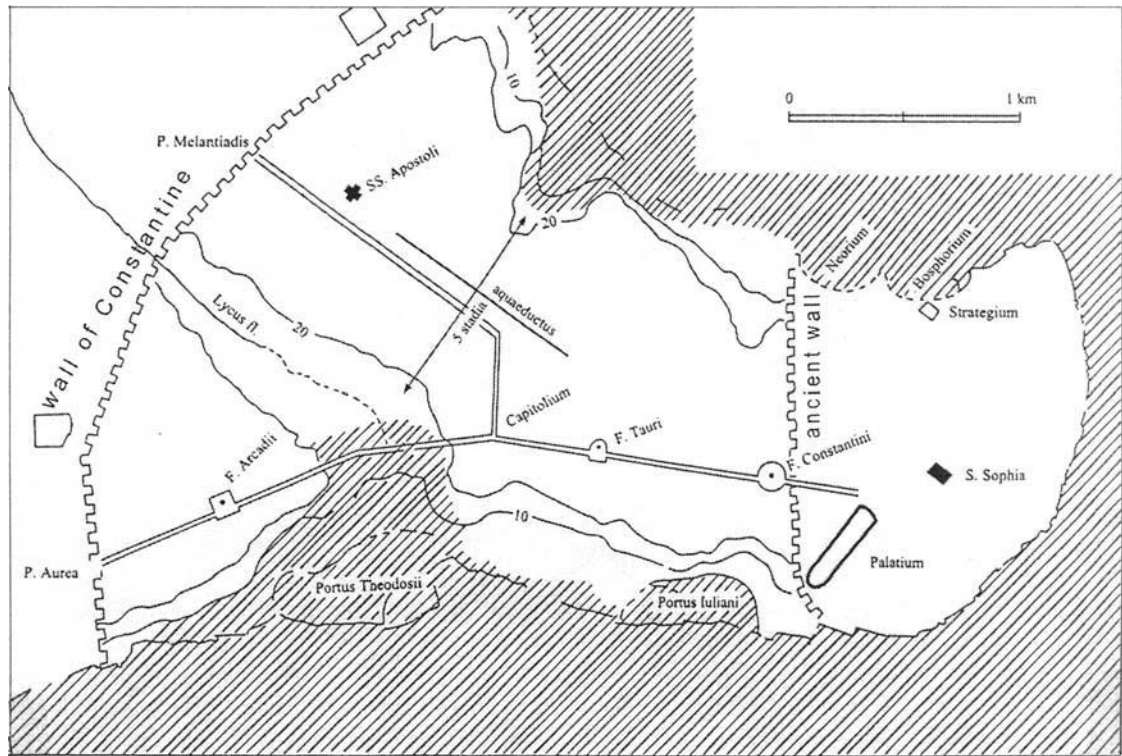
A stream known as the Lycus, now canalized beneath the streets of Istanbul, entered the city from the west and flowed in the valley that separates the Seventh Hill from the Fifth and Sixth Hills, finally emptying into the bay that indented the Marmara shore before it was filled in beginning in the late Roman era (Fig. 4).



3. Topographic map of Constantinople (from Janin)

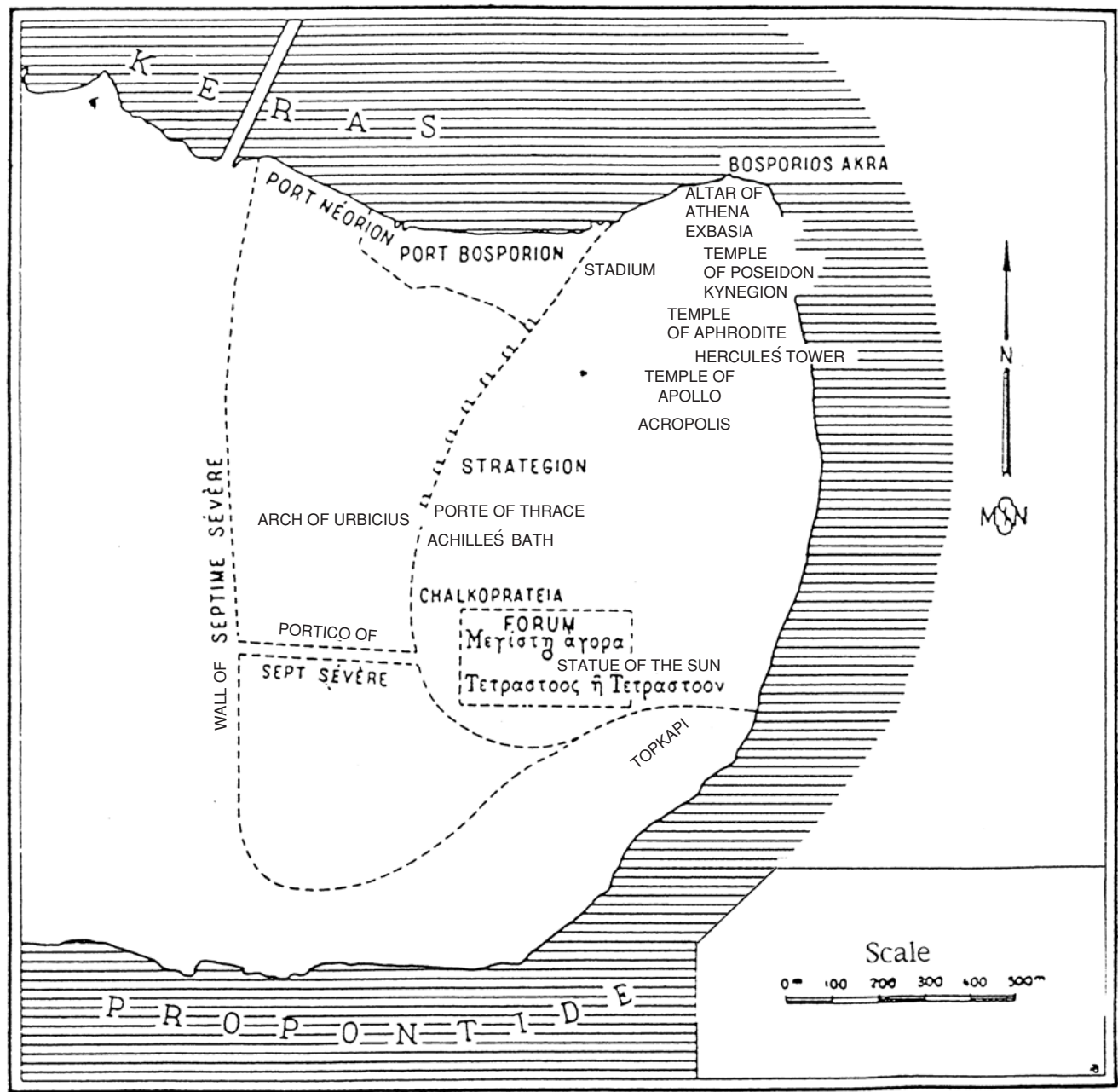
The city was originally known to the Greeks as Byzantion, whose Latin form, Byzantium, is now more widely used. Byzantium was named for its legendary founder, Byzas the Megarian, who is supposed to have established a Greek colony here c. 660 B.C. The Megarians had seventeen years earlier established a colony at Chalcedon, today's Kadıköy, on the Asian shore of the Marmara just beyond the mouth of the Bosphorus.

According to tradition, before Byzas set out on his expedition, he consulted the Delphic oracle, who advised him to settle "opposite the land of the blind." The meaning of this, according to Herodotus, quoting the Persian general Megabazas, was that "the men of Chalcedon must have been blind at the time, for if they had any eyes, they would not have chosen an inferior site when a much finer one [that of Byzantium] lay ready to hand."²



4. Hypothetical plan of the shoreline of Constantinople in the fourth century A.D. (from Mango)

The original site of Byzantium was on the First Hill, where the waters of the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn merge and flow into the Marmara. Byzantium was laid out with its acropolis, or upper city, on the steep-sided summit of the First Hill and with its lower town extending along the shores of the Marmara and the Golden Horn. One of the advantages offered by this site, compared with that of Chalcedon, was its greater defensibility, for the steep hill at the confluence of the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn was protected by the sea on all sides except to the west, where a defense wall could be erected. Another advantage was that the Golden Horn provided a superb natural harbor, shielded from storms by the heights that enclosed it on all sides except where it opens into the Bosphorus, and there the cape known in antiquity as the Promontorium Bosphorium curves around to protect the inner port. This promontory also acts as a barrier to divert the shoals of mackerel that swim down the Bosphorus from the Black Sea, forcing them into the port and creating an abundant fishery that became one of the principal sources of income for the people of Byzantium (Fig. 5). Other important sources of income were the tolls and harbor fees paid by the ships that passed through the strait, for Byzantium controlled the Bosphorus from the beginning of its history, and this was the principal reason for its subsequent rise to greatness. Gilles, after describing the topography of the ancient city, wrote that “the Bosphorus is the first creator of Byzantium, greater and more important than Byzas.”³



5. Map of ancient Byzantium (from Janin)

Byzantium and the other Greek cities in Asia Minor and eastern Thrace came under Persian rule soon after 546 B.C., when Cyrus the Great captured Sardis and ended the history of the Lydian kingdom. Cyrus and his successors, the first three being Cambyzes II, Darius, and Xerxes, organized the Persian kingdom into twenty provinces called satrapies, each ruled by a governor called a satrap. The Greek cities had governors appointed by the satraps, from among their own citizens. These governors, under the aegis of Persia, dispensed with democratic assemblies and ruled as dictators (or tyrants, as the Greeks called them). Byzantium was

part of the satrapy governed from Daskylium, and its earliest known tyrant is identified by Herodotus as Ariston, who was in control of the city when Darius set out on his great expedition against the Scythians in 513.

The following year Darius reached the Bosphorus, where he had the Greek engineer Mandrocles of Samos build a bridge of boats across the strait at its narrowest point. Herodotus describes this incident in Book IV of the *Histories*, in which Byzantium makes its first appearance in recorded history.

During the remaining years of the sixth century B.C., Byzantium and the other Greek cities in the east remained under Persian rule. Then in 499 the Ionian cities of westernmost Asia Minor revolted against the Persians under the leadership of Aristagoras, the tyrant of Miletus. After some early successes, including the liberation of Byzantium and Chalcedon, the revolt was crushed in 494, after which the Persians destroyed Miletus and a number of other cities, including Byzantium.

Byzantium was apparently soon rebuilt under Persian rule, for when Xerxes invaded Greece in 481, the city contributed a hundred ships to his fleet, according to Herodotus. After the Persians were defeated at Plataea in 479 by the Greek allies under Pausanias, son of the Spartan king Cleombrotus, the survivors made their way home under the command of Artabazus, who had them ferried across the Bosphorus at Byzantium.

Byzantium was a *polis*, a city-state, its government usually democratic, though at times it was controlled by oligarchies and sometimes by tyrants. The center of government was the *bouleterion*, or council, and there was also an *ekklésia*, or popular assembly.

Theopompus of Chios writes of daily life in Byzantium in the latter half of the fourth century B.C., when the people of Chalcedon shared in the government of the *polis* and adopted the sybaritic ways of the Byzantines as well:

The Byzantines had by this time long had a democratic government; also their city was situated at a trading-place, and their entire population spent their time in the market-place and by the water side; hence they had accustomed themselves to amours and drinking in the taverns. As for the Chalcedonians, before they all came to have a share with the Byzantines in the government, they devoted themselves increasingly to the better pursuits of life; but after they had once tasted of the democratic liberties of the Byzantines they sank utterly into corrupt luxury, and in their daily lives, from having been the most sober and restrained, they became wine-bibbers and spend-thrifts.⁴

Athenaeus of Naucratis cites the historian Phylarchus of Athens in telling of the dissolute ways of the Byzantines in his *Deipnosophistes*, or *Doctors at Dinner*, written in the mid-second century A.D.:

Phylarchus, in the sixth book, says that the Byzantines are all besotted with wine and live in the wine-shop; they let out their marriage-chambers, along with their wives, to strangers, and cannot bear to hear the sound of a war-trumpet even in their dreams. Hence on one occasion,

when war was made on them, their general Leonides ordered tents for the wine-dealers to be set up inside the wall and at last they reluctantly stopped leaving the ranks.⁵

Byzantium produced one of the very few women poets of ancient Greece other than the immortal Sappho. She was the epic poetess Moero, who flourished c. 300 B.C. and whose best-known work, now lost, was entitled *Arai*, or *Curses*. Among the surviving fragments are lines written in praise of Dionysos and Aphrodite, the deities of wine and love, whose cults were evidently very popular in Byzantium:

Cluster, full of the juice of Dionysos,
 Thou resteth under the roof of Aphrodite's chamber;
 No longer shall the vine, thy mother,
 Cast her lovely branch around thee,
 And put above thy head her sweet leaves.⁶

Soon after the expulsion of Pausanias, Byzantium became a member of the Delian Confederacy, a maritime league of about 300 Greek city-states dominated by Athens. The annual tribute paid by the Byzantines was one of the highest in the league, a measure of Byzantium's wealth at the time.

When the Peloponnesian War began in 431 B.C., Byzantium was forced to join the Athenian League against Sparta. But then in 413, after the failure of the Athenian expedition against Syracuse, Byzantium and many other erstwhile allies of Athens defected to the Spartans.

The Athenians mounted a naval expedition against Byzantium and Chalcidion in 409. When the Athenians reached the Bosphorus, they built a fortified settlement on the Asian shore opposite Byzantium, naming it Chrysopolis, the City of Gold, now known in Turkish as Üsküdar. Using Chrysopolis as their base, the Athenians, led by Alcibiades, besieged and captured Byzantium, which was then forced to restore its alliance with Athens.

The Peloponnesian War came to an end in 404, when the Spartans decisively defeated the Athenians in a battle on the Hellespont. The Spartans then occupied Byzantium, though the Athenians again took the city in 390. Byzantium remained under the control of Athens until 355, when it emerged as an independent city-state at the end of a conflict known as the Social War.

Meanwhile Macedonia had risen as a new power under Philip II, who came to the throne in 359. The Byzantines at first were allies of Philip, but when he invaded Thrace in 341, leaving his son Alexander to serve as regent in Pella, they and their neighbors allied themselves with Athens and prepared their defenses against the Macedonians. Philip attacked Byzantium in 340, beginning a memorable siege in which the Byzantines were assisted by the Athenians. Philip finally broke off the siege in the spring of 339, whereupon the citizens of Byzantium erected a monument to the Athenians for having come to their aid.

Byzantium retained its independence throughout the Hellenistic period, which began with the death of Alexander the Great in 323. During that period