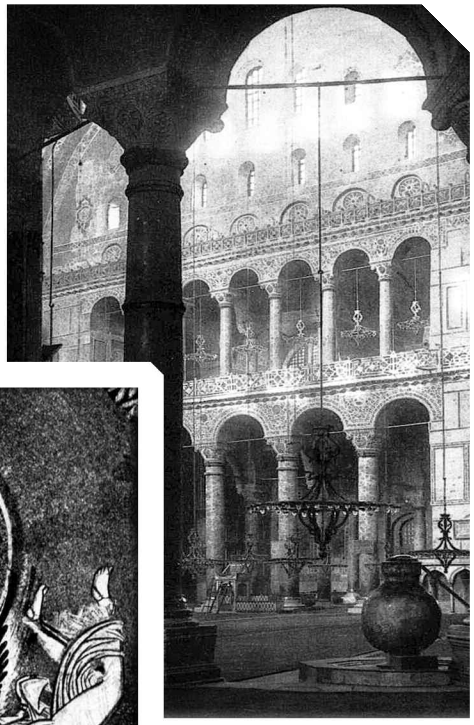
GURPS® Fourth Edition

Hot Spots:™ CONSTANTINOPLE 527-1204 A.D.™



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*An e23 Sourcebook for **GURPS**®*

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Reviewers: Phil Masters, David L. Pulver, and William Stoddard

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 crueler 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.

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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.

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 (×2) **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.

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 chartoularios from him, and use the chartoularios 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 chartoularios tou vestiariou (p. 16). Alexius I made more formal arrangements, appointing a *logothetes ton sekreton* 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 *chartoularios*, 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 chartoularios* 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.

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 *worshiped*. 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 semicircular 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 to 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 eight 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).

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