

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

EARLIEST TIMES

Semistra, the earliest-known settlement on the site of İstanbul, was probably founded around 1000 BC, a few hundred years after the Trojan War and in the same period that kings David and Solomon ruled in Jerusalem. Semistra was followed by a fishing village named Lygos, which occupied Seraglio Point (Sarayburnu) where Topkapı Palace (Topkapı Sarayı) stands today.

Around 700 BC, colonists from Megara (near Corinth) in Greece founded the city of Chalcedon (now Kadıköy) on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus. Chalcedon became one of a dozen Greek fishing colonies along the shores of the Propontis (the ancient name for the Sea of Marmara). The historian Theopompus of Chios, cited in John Freely's *Istanbul: The Imperial City*, wrote in the latter half of the 4th century that its inhabitants 'devoted themselves unceasingly to the better pursuits of life'. Their way of life was apparently in stark contrast to that of the dissolute Byzantines, who founded their settlement across the Bosphorus at Seraglio Point in 657 BC.

FIRST INCARNATION: BYZANTIUM

Legend tells us that Byzantium was founded by a Megarian colonist named Byzas, the son of the god Poseidon and the nymph Keroessa, daughter of Zeus and Io. Before leaving Greece, Byzas had asked the oracle at Delphi where he should establish his new colony. The enigmatic answer was 'Opposite the blind'. All this made sense when Byzas and his fellow colonists sailed up the Bosphorus and noticed the colony on the Asian shore at Chalcedon. Looking west, they saw the small fishing village of Lygos, built on a magnificent and easily fortified natural harbour of the Golden Horn (Haliç) known to the Greeks as Chrysokeras) on the European shore. Thinking, as legend has it, that the settlers of Chalcedon must have been blind to disregard such a superb position, Byzas and his friends settled here and their new town came to be called Byzantium after its founder.

The new colony quickly prospered, largely due to its ability to levy tolls and harbour fees on ships passing through the Bosphorus, then as now an important waterway. A thriving marketplace was established and the inhabitants lived on traded goods and the abundant fish stocks in the surrounding waters. In all, the early Byzantines were a fortunate lot. They walled their city to ensure its invincibility from attack, enslaved the local Thracian population to do most of the hard work and worshipped the Greek Olympian gods. Theopompus of Chios might have thought that the Chalcedons lived a good clean life when they first established their city on the opposite shore, but he had no such compliment for the Byzantines, writing that they 'accustomed themselves to amours and drinking in the taverns'.

In 512 BC Darius, emperor of Persia, captured the city during his campaign against the Scythians. Following the retreat of the Persians in 478 BC, the town came under the influence and protection of Athens and joined the Athenian League. It was a turbulent relationship, with Byzantium revolting a number of times, only to be defeated by the Athenians. During one of the revolts, the Athenian navy mounted an expedition against Byzantium and Chalcedon and sailed up the Bosphorus to establish a settlement at Chrysopolis ('the City of Gold'), site of the present-day suburb of Üsküdar. From this base they successfully besieged Byzantium.

The Spartans took the city after the end of the Peloponnesian War (404 BC) but were ousted in 390 BC, when Byzantium once again joined the League of Athens. It was granted independence in 355 BC but stayed under the Athenian umbrella, withstanding with Athenian help a siege by Philip, father of Alexander the Great, in 340 BC.

By the end of the Hellenistic period, Byzantium had formed an alliance with the Roman Empire. It retained its status as a free state, which it even kept after being officially incorporated into the Roman Empire in AD 79 by Vespasian, but it paid significant taxes for the privilege. Life

was relatively uneventful until the city's leaders made a big mistake: they picked the wrong side in a Roman war of succession following the death of the Emperor Pertinax in AD 193. When Septimius Severus emerged victorious over his rival Pescennius Niger, he mounted a three-year siege of the city, eventually massacring Byzantium's citizens, razing its walls and burning it to the ground. Ancient Byzantium was no more.

The new emperor was aware of the city's important strategic position, and he soon set about rebuilding it. He pardoned the remaining citizens and built a circuit of walls that stretched roughly from where the New Mosque (Yeni Cami) is today (Map pp50–1) to the Bucoleon Palace (Map pp50–1), enclosing a city twice the size of its predecessor. The Hippodrome (p57) was built by Severus, as was a colonnaded way that followed the present path of Divan Yolu. He also erected a gateway known as the Miliarium Aureum or, more simply, the Milion. A weathered marble stellae from this gate can still be seen today (Map pp50–1). Severus named his new city Augusta Antonina and it was subsequently ruled by a succession of emperors, including the great Diocletian (r 284–305).

DECLINE OF ROME & THE RISE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Diocletian had decreed that after his retirement, the government of the Roman Empire should be overseen by co-emperors Galerius in the east (Augusta Antonina) and Constantine in the west (Rome). This resulted in a civil war, which was won by Constantine in AD 324 when he defeated Licinius, Galerius' successor, at Chrysopolis.

With his victory, Constantine (r 324–37) became sole emperor of a reunited empire. He also became the first Christian emperor, though he didn't formally convert until he was on his deathbed. To solidify his power he summoned the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea (İznik) in 325, which established the precedent of the emperor's supremacy in church affairs.

Constantine also decided to move the capital of the empire to the shores of the Bosphorus, where he had forged his great victory and where the line between the Eastern and Western divisions of the Empire had previously been drawn. He built a new, wider circle of walls around the site of Byzantium and laid out a magnificent city within. The Hippodrome was extended and a forum was built on the crest of the second hill, near today's Nuruosmaniye Mosque (Map pp50–1). The city was dedicated on 11 May 330 as New Rome, but soon came to be called Constantinople. First settled as a fishing village over 1000 years earlier, the settlement on Seraglio Point was now the capital of the Eurasian world and would remain so for almost another 1000 years.

Constantine died in 337, just seven years after the dedication of his new capital. His empire was divided up between his three sons: Constantius, Constantien and Constans. Constantinople was part of Constantius' share. His power base was greatly increased in 353 when he overthrew both of his brothers and brought the empire under his sole control.

Constantius died in 361 and was succeeded by his cousin Julian. Emperor Jovian was next, succeeded by Valens (of aqueduct fame; p80).

The city continued to grow under the rule of the emperors. Theodosius I ('the Great'; r 378–95) had a forum built on the present site of Beyazıt Sq and a massive triumphal gate built in the city walls, the Porta Aurea (Golden Gate; p125). He also erected the Obelisk of Theodosius at the Hippodrome. His grandson Emperor Theodosius II (r 408–50) came to the throne as a boy, heavily influenced by his sister Pulcheria, who acted as regent until her brother was old enough to rule

1000 BC

The settlements of Lygos and Semistra are founded by Thracian tribes; Plinius mentions the founding of Semistra in his historical accounts and a few traces of Lygos remain near Seraglio Point

657 BC

The god Poseidon and the nymph Keroessa, daughter of Zeus and Io, have a son, Byzas, who travels up the Bosphorus and founds Byzantium on the site of Lygos

335 BC

Byzantium is granted independence but stays under the Athenian umbrella, withstanding with Athenian help a siege by Philip, father of Alexander the Great, in 340 BC