

Sarah Bassett (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Constantinople*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 2022 (Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World). XX, 413 p., 16 ill., 9 site plans, 7 maps. £ 79.99/\$ 105.00. ISBN: 978-1-108-49818-0.

Constantinople has been caught between reality and the imagination since Late Antiquity. On the one hand, the city housed real people, which its leaders struggled to feed, educate, and keep safe through centuries of expansion, plague, earthquakes, and siege. On the other hand, it is a city that leaned on its Greek, Roman, Christian, and Ottoman pasts and that was often caught between and exploited for those pasts. “The Cambridge Companion to Constantinople” explores these tensions by offering a rich conversation rooted in the dynamic fabric of the city as it developed from a late antique to a Byzantine city and then to an early modern Ottoman city. The contributors’ close attention to built environment, population, administrative structures, and resource distribution systems demonstrates the extent to which we should think of the city as an ecosystem subject to changing conditions of growth and contraction. As such, it is a welcome addition to an already extensive bibliography on the city, its history, architecture, religion, and reception.

The Companion is divided into five parts, each consisting of targeted, concise, and highly accessible chapters written by recognized experts.¹ Part I (“The Place and Its People”, pp. 15–63) outlines the city’s history, urban development, and demographics, together illustrating how profoundly the city was shaped by cycles of expansion, decline, and renewal. Here, Anthony Kaldellis’s chapter on the city’s population cycles is particularly illuminating and should be read in conversation with every other chapter of the volume (“The People of Constantinople”, pp. 50–63). This was a city that expanded quickly from 25,000 to half a million in its first two centuries, to then experience devastating population loss from plague and famine in the following centuries. The population would rebound to perhaps 400,000 people by the thirteenth century, only to decline again in the decades prior to the Ottoman siege in 1543. What were the consequences of these dramatic shifts in population? For one, it meant that Constantinople was a city dependent on immigrants, particularly during periods of rapid growth.

1 For a detailed table of contents, readers are referred to the end of this review.

Kaldellis estimates that in the later fifth century, for example, the immigration rate was “almost 10,000 new people *every year*” (p. 51, emphasis original). And that estimate seems to barely account for significant population losses in the first half of the sixth century, with an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 deaths during the Nika Riots in 532. Second, the significant depopulation in the second half of the sixth century and again in the fourteenth profoundly transformed the use of space. Portions of the city were abandoned as the centers of population shifted, often towards monasteries and churches, leaving open green space for gardens and farming. The consequences of these fluctuation provide vital context for much of the discussion in Part II, “Practical Matters” (pp. 65–131), which delves into the city’s infrastructures: water-sourcing, food supply, the processes of construction and building maintenance, and the city’s defenses. Each of the chapters of this section stands well on its own, but placed in conversation with Part I’s discussion of architectural expansions and population fluctuation they afford the opportunity to reconsider the shifting ecosystems of the city as a response to changing fortunes and the challenges of managing an aging city rather than an idealized space.

With Parts III and IV, the volume’s value as a reference becomes most apparent, as each chapter provides concise, but detailed, surveys organized clearly by subtopic, civic region, or time period. This section will prove particularly useful for those looking for introductions to various aspects of Constantinople’s built landscape and institutions. Part III (“Urban Experiences”, pp. 133–227) offers close examinations of the urban experience of the city, with attention to how that experience changed from the Constantinian foundation through the Turkish conquest in the fifteenth century. Its first three chapters address imperial, residential, and commercial spaces, followed by three chapters devoted to “sacred dimensions,” dividing between them churches and ecclesiastical matters, monasticism, and death and burial. Part IV (“Institutions and Activities”, pp. 229–291) turns to the city’s institutions, addressing in turn its administrative structures, philanthropic institutions, education, and entertainment. In this section, the effects of the city’s population cycles again become apparent as the respective authors trace shifts in these institutions. For example, it is not insignificant that churches and monasteries became loci for many activities, particularly education and the distribution of food and water, between the seventh and ninth centuries, precisely

when we should expect the reorganization of formal and informal administrative structures in the wake of a mass depopulation event.

Even as Constantinople faced the real effects of population flux, architectural aging, and supply disruptions, it was also – and always had been – a city of the imagination. Part V (“Encountering Constantinople”, pp. 293–357) engages more directly the significant tension between reality and representation, focusing on external and retrospective encounters with Constantinople. Two chapters focus on medieval travelers to the city, from envoys and merchants to pilgrims and crusaders. The section concludes with two chapters on the ‘invention’ of Constantinople in the early modern period, the first focusing on European antiquarians and the second on early Ottoman Istanbul. Apparent throughout Part V is the immense sway of antiquarianism, as visitors encountered a New Rome or a New Jerusalem and the illusion of a well-apportioned ancient city filled with a large, bustling population. A different picture emerges immediately following the Ottoman conquest with surveys revealing a “picture of destitution and ruin” (p. 341), as Çiğdem Kafescioğlu observes in her chapter on early modern Istanbul (“Byzantium in Early Modern Istanbul”, pp. 339–357). But even in this new political context, the city’s past was ever present, seen both in the destruction, repurposing, and spoliation of existing structures and in an architectural revivalism that reproduced features from pre-Ottoman structures. Perhaps what stands out the most throughout Part V is the long history of idealizing representation and colonializing exploitation.

Indeed, as Nike Kontrakou observes (“Medieval Travellers to Constantinople: Wonders and Wonder”, pp. 295–309), “everyone saw Constantinople according to his own preconceptions and knowledge base” (p. 305). Constantine had presented the Roman empire with a New Rome, pilgrims encountered a New Jerusalem filled with churches and relics, early modern antiquarians found a city of classical antiquities and manuscripts. The influence of such romanticizing accounts, coupled with the fragmentary and dispersed nature of material remains (including archaeological evidence, but also iconography and manuscript), is a known challenge for anyone working on Constantinople. One of the Companion’s consistent strengths is how carefully the contributors parse these challenges as they provide nuanced discussions of their topics. While there is some overlap between chapters (for example, Albrecht Berger’s and Philipp Niewöhner’s chapter on residential patterns [“Residential Constantinople”, pp. 150–165] repeats some

information from Paul Magdalino's on imperial space ["Imperial Constantinople", pp. 135–149]), such instances make it even more useful as a reference, especially for those approaching the material for the first time, as it allows multiple entry points into the study of the city and allows for targeted investigation. Additional cross-referencing and explicit conversation between chapters would encourage broader exploration. For example, a reader interested in Constantinople as a pilgrimage site would benefit from discussion from other chapters on the mercenaries, envoys, and book collectors who visited the city in order to consider their overlapping interests or discussion about philanthropic institutions to gain a broader picture of the logistics of visiting the city.

Closer attention to several features would also have enhanced the volume's utility. For instance, the typeface of the map of the city's land walls on p. 120 is too small; in this case, the reader would be better served by referring to Alexander van Millingen's volume from which the map is derived.² The inclusion of a timeline would also have been a welcome aide for students who have not previously studied the city's history. It should also be noted the volume occasionally slips into the errors to which handbooks can be prone, in particular the simplification of historical circumstances. Such is found in passing comments about Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the bishop Makedonios's association with Arianism, both assertions that have been problematized.³ There is also the danger of homogenizing the city and extending *elite* habits and circumstances as representative of the experience of the larger population. Surely for many in the city, daily life was not so pleasurably spent "between ordered spectacle and easy domesticity" (p. 285), as Marcus Rautman characterizes it ("Entertainment", pp. 277–291). Other chapters in the volume trouble this easy picture with their discussions of plague, famine, enslavement, and depopulation. When such generalizations and simplifications occur, they are always directed toward ensuring

2 A. van Millingen: Byzantine Constantinople. The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical Sites. London 1899, facing p. 19.

3 See, for example, discussion in S. Bradbury: Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century. In: CPh 89, 1994, pp. 120–139; R. Van Dam: Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge. Cambridge 2011; D. M. Gwynn: The Eusebians. The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the 'Arian Controversy'. Oxford/New York 2007 (Oxford Theological Monographs), pp. 135–141.

clear, accessible narratives for the topic at hand, but they stand out against so much other careful, thorough detail.

Indeed, one of the strengths of the volume is the sheer amount of detail and careful explication. Each chapter offers a wealth of information, with ample references for further investigation. Not once does the density of information come at the expense of clarity and accessibility. Special attention was clearly given to ensure that chapters would be accessible to the non-specialist, as seen, for example, in Vasileios Marinis's careful demarcation of ecclesial spaces ("Sacred Dimensions: Church Building and Ecclesiastical Practice", pp. 180–199) and Timothy S. Miller's survey of terminology related to "Philanthropic Institutions" (pp. 245–262). Moreover, when considered across the volume, the detail offered by the Companion makes abundantly clear that Constantinople was *not* a place of memory, but one that was messy and dynamic. It was a city that worked for some people sometimes, that exploited the bodies of others, and that erased the enslaved and ethnically excluded. It was at once beautiful and charged with history, precarious and in disrepair. Rarely do studies of the city place these elements of Constantinopolitan life together so clearly and in a way that underscores the appropriateness of the ancient metaphor of the city as body.

These strengths far outweigh any weaknesses of the volume. In short, "The Cambridge Companion to Constantinople" is an immensely valuable volume that should be part of any library devoted to the study of Constantinople or Byzantine History. It should quickly prove to be a standard reference for instructors, students, and researchers.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	X
Notes on Contributors	XII
Acknowledgments	XVI
List of Abbreviations	XVIII
 Introduction	 1
<i>Sarah Bassett</i>	
 Part I: The Place and Its People	
1 Before Constantinople	17
<i>Thomas Russell</i>	
2 Urban Development and Decline, Fourth–Fifteenth Centuries	33
<i>Albrecht Berger</i>	
3 The People of Constantinople	50
<i>Anthony Kaldellis</i>	
 Part II: Practical Matters	
4 Waters for a Capital: Hydraulic Infrastructure and Use in Byzantine Constantinople	67
<i>James Crow</i>	
5 The Supply of Food to Constantinople	87
<i>Raymond Van Dam</i>	
6 Constantinople: Building and Maintenance	102
<i>Enrico Zanini</i>	
7 The Defence of Constantinople	117
<i>Eric McGeer</i>	
 Part III: Urban Experiences	
8 Imperial Constantinople	135
<i>Paul Magdalino</i>	

9	Residential Constantinople <i>Albrecht Berger, Philipp Niewöhner</i>	150
10	Commercial Constantinople <i>Koray Durak</i>	166
11	Sacred Dimensions: Church Building and Ecclesiastical Practice <i>Vasileios Marinis</i>	180
12	Sacred Dimensions: Constantinopolitan Monasticism <i>Dirk Krausmüller</i>	200
13	Sacred Dimensions: Death and Burial <i>Mark J. Johnson</i>	214
 Part IV: Institutions and Activities		
14	The Administration of Constantinople <i>Andreas Gkoutzioukostas</i>	231
15	Philanthropic Institutions <i>Timothy S. Miller</i>	245
16	Schools and Learning <i>Niels Gaul</i>	263
17	Entertainment <i>Marcus Rautman</i>	277
 Part V: Encountering Constantinople		
18	Medieval Travellers to Constantinople: Wonders and Wonder <i>Nike Koutrakou</i>	295
19	Pilgrimage to Constantinople <i>Annemarie Weyl Carr</i>	310
20	Encountering and Inventing Constantinople in Early Modern Europe <i>Sean Roberts</i>	324
21	Byzantium in Early Modern Istanbul <i>Çiğdem Kafescioğlu</i>	339
Bibliography		358
Index		407