

Constantinople: City and Urban

In 324 C.E., after carefully weighing his options, Constantine the Great chose for the new capital of his empire the site of ancient Byzantium. Founded in the seventh century B.C.E, the Greco-Roman city had been razed in the second century C.E. by Septimus Severus and only partially rebuilt, creating exactly the setting Constantine was looking for. It had ties to the ancient grandeur of Greece, but was in a state of ruin, so Constantine could mould it as he wished, transform it into the most magnificent city in the empire.<sup>1</sup> I plan to argue that Constantine's shaping or re-shaping of the city in order to create the exemplar of what it meant to be a Roman imperial city can be discussed in the context of Henri Lefebvre's models of the city and of the urban.

Over a hundred years before Constantine chose the site, in 196 C.E., Septimus Severus had begun a similar reconstruction project. Byzantium had been on the opposing side of a civil war (which Septimus had won) and as punishment he had all but destroyed the city and killed many of its inhabitants. Seeing the potential of the site, he chose to recreate the city rather than abandon it. So, renaming the city Colonia Antonina, after his ancestral line, and, ignoring the sad state of the city walls (which he and his army had destroyed in the siege), he chose to start the city's transformation by building public monuments that represented the city's new status as Roman. Rather than focusing on the site of the ancient Akropolis, a new site in the city's southwestern corner was chosen for the monumental project with five parts: colonnaded streets (emboloi), an agora (Tetrastoon), a Basilika, a public bath (Baths of Zeuxippos) and a circus (Hippodrome) (see figures 1 & 2, legend and plan of Severan Byzantium). As Sarah Basset notes in *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople*, "Popular institutions like the public baths and

the circus would have created new focal points for urban activity on the city's western edge that would have drawn the populace out of the archaic center."<sup>2</sup> Severus' restoration plan was incomplete at the time of his death in 211 C.E. His successors later abandoned the city, along with the Roman monuments he had created that were so appealing to Constantine a century later.

Like Severus, Constantine's first act was to rename the city; but unlike Severus' new name, Constantinople remained the city's title until 1930. Instead of following the Severan strategy to reconstructing the city, Constantine began by restoring the city walls, which he also extended by three kilometers, "almost quadrupling the urban territory."<sup>3</sup> (see figure 3, plan of Constantinople) After the fortification of the city was complete, he focused on the Severan monuments as the centerpiece of his new plan. He expanded the narrow roads to create grand paths between the monumental civic buildings. He also called for the construction of two new temples, one to Rhea/Kybele and the other to Tyche/Fortuna, and an imperial palace. The ceremonial gate to this palace was at one end of the grand boulevard which, at the other end, led directly to the agora, renamed the Augusteion. Basset argues that Constantine had "created a monumental set of interrelated yet independent public spaces that responded to and defined urban life in its most public aspects."<sup>4</sup> This, she argued, was because his changes to the city "worked on a purely pragmatic level to provide the kinds of spaces and settings that would accommodate the institutions of Roman urban life." This attention to detail went "beyond the mere facilitation of the practical to shape an idea of urban life that was itself expressive of the relationship between city and empire."<sup>5</sup>

Basset focuses here on the effects of Constantine's changes on the urban scene. Throughout the first part of her book, she argues that all the single monuments, though important

in their own right, mainly built up the Roman imperial image of the entire city. But what is her definition of urban? That a space is “urban” for her seems to simply denote that people live or work there. This seems to be a much less developed definition than that of Henri Lefebvre in “The Specificity of the City.”<sup>6</sup> Though Lefebvre is writing in the context of post-industrial cities, I would argue that his terms and concepts can be applied anywhere the city and the urban (in his terms) exist.

The city, he argues, “changes when society as a whole changes. Yet, the city’s transformations are not the passive outcomes of changes in the social whole. The city also depends as essentially on relations of immediacy, of direct relations between persons and groups which make up society...”<sup>7</sup> The city, then, is somehow more than its physical existence, but still bound by it. “The city remains *object* but not in the way of particular, pliable and instrumental object: such as a pencil or a sheet of paper. Its objectivity, or ‘objectality’, might rather be closer to that of the *language* which individuals and groups receive before modifying it...”<sup>8</sup> The city exists but in a state of constant change. Constantinople is thus a city, and in Lefebvre’s terms, one might say, *the* city. With each new ruler it is literally reshaped to reflect his vision, as each speaker changes the language slightly, incorporating different regional styles and dialects. Constantine was hardly the last to do this; Constantinople was conquered several more times, with each producing physical as well as ideological changes in the city’s urban identity. Changes so severe would take place slowly over hundreds of years without any sort of conscious choice in any other city; but the entire city of Byzantium was reshaped consciously to produce a new image of the city.

Lefebvre continues: “We should perhaps here introduce a distinction between the *city*, a present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact, and the *urban*, a social

reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought.”<sup>9</sup> When a place is *urban*, for Lefebvre, it means much more than that it is inhabited or used by people. *Urban* is reality in some way – more than being the physical use of the city, it is the idea of such use, “constructed or reconstructed by thought.” It is easily shaped, like the city; the example of language would seem to be useful here as well. The true difference, then, seems to be simply that the *city* exists physically whereas the *urban* exists only as an idea. Constantinople, then, seems to be a perfect example of both. The two Romans who reshaped the city between 196 and 330 C.E. (by no means the first or last to do so) had clear ideas of how the city should function. Like the language reforms that are periodically instituted by governments, these were quick but deep changes in the physical functionality of the city.

The *urban* qualities of the city were changed as well. Constantinople was no longer just any city; it was the seat of the greatest empire in the world, a monument to Roman victory. How inhabitants of the city viewed themselves was changed as well. They went from living in a city in 324 C.E. to living in *the* city in 330 C.E., and Constantine was determined to make this change apparent. By redirecting physical traffic, Constantine redirected thought. The center of the city became the *agora*, from which the city’s main boulevard led directly to the imperial palace. In this newly rechristened form, the alterations Constantinople received perfectly exemplify Lefebvre’s conception of the *city* and the *urban*; yet the radical metamorphosis that a metropolis normally undergoes gradually occurred essentially overnight. This was not only a physical series of transformations, it was a reworking of the city’s conception of itself, its *urban* identity. The change was fast but most importantly, the change was conscious.

<sup>1</sup> In my discussion of the history of Constantinople I rely heavily on Sarah Basset's *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Basset 21

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* 23

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* 26

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. "The Specificity of the City." (1968). Source: *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Joanne Morra & Marquard Smith. London & New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Lefebvre 102

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* 104

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

## Figures







1. Ancient Akropolis		
2. Tetrastoon - Augusteion		
3. Baths of Zeuxippos		pre-existing architecture
4. Hippodrome		
5. Basilika		
6. Strategion		new sculptural installation
7. Mese		
8. Severan Wall		
9. Palace		extant sculptural installation
10. H. Eirene		
11. H. Sophia		
12. Forum of Constantine		additions made to extant sculptural installation
13. Tetrapylon		
14. Philadelphion		
15. Capitol		
16. Baths of Constantine		restoration & rebuilding, A.D. 532
17. Mausoleum of Constantine - Holy Apostles		
18. H. Mokios		
19. Constantinian Wall		
20. Forum of Theodosius - Forum Tauri		restoration with dismantled sculptural installation, A.D. 532
21. Forum of Arkadios - Xerolophon		
22. Theodosian Wall		
23. Golden Gate		
24. Lausus Collection		
25. Baths of Arkadios		
26. Chalke Gate		

Fig. 1: Legend for plans of Constantinople (Source: Basset, Sarah. *The Image of Late Antique Constantinople*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p. 20 Courtesy of Brian Madigan)

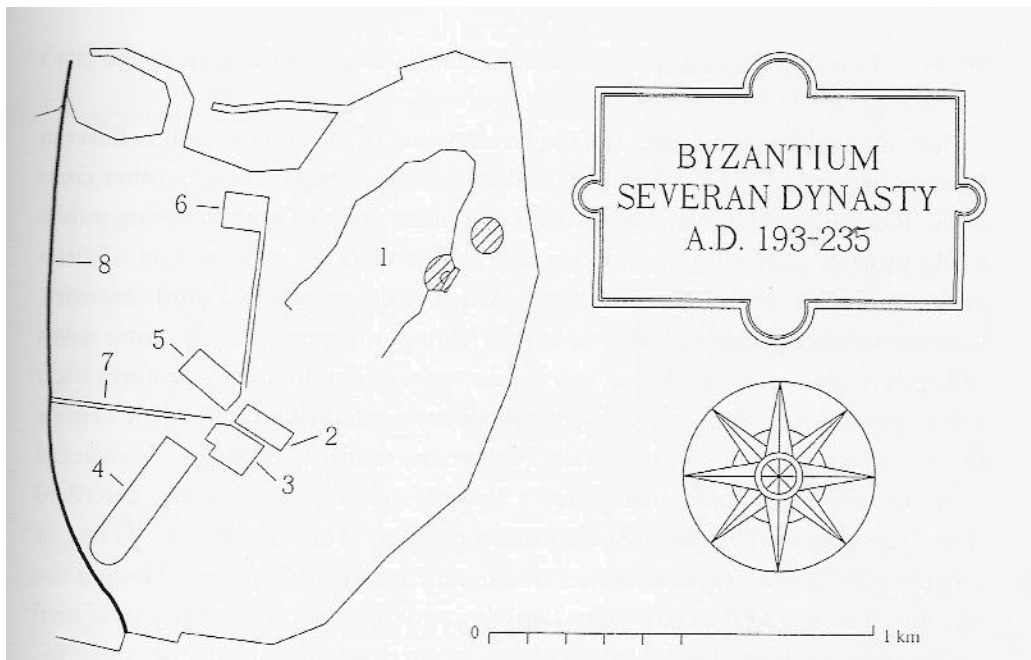


Fig. 2: Byzantium under the Severan dynasty (Source: Basset, Sarah. *The Image of Late Antique Constantinople*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p. 21 Courtesy of Brian Madigan)

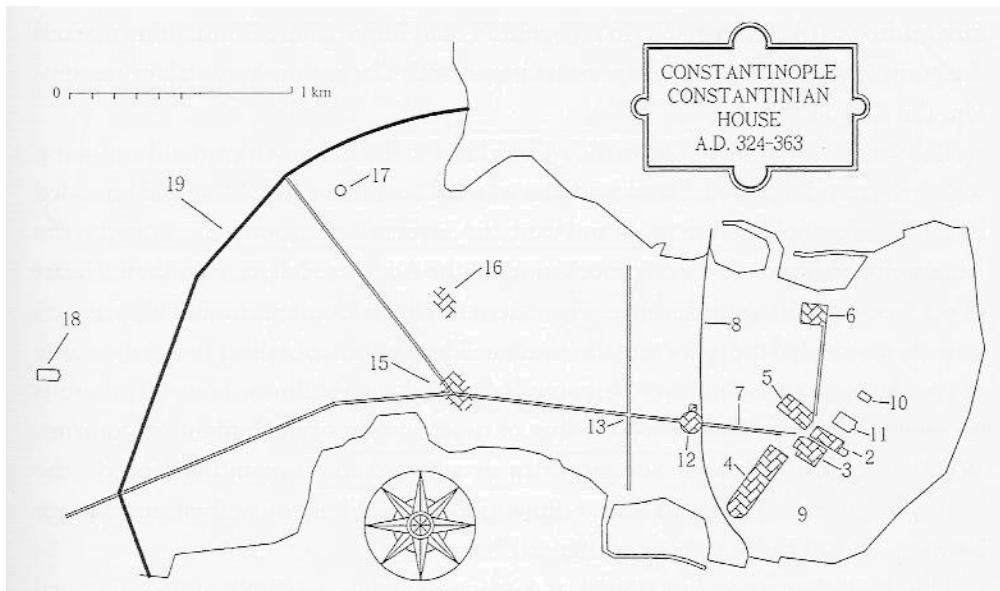


Fig. 3: Constantinople under the Constantinian House (Source: Basset, Sarah. *The Image of Late Antique Constantinople*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p. 23 Courtesy of Brian Madigan)