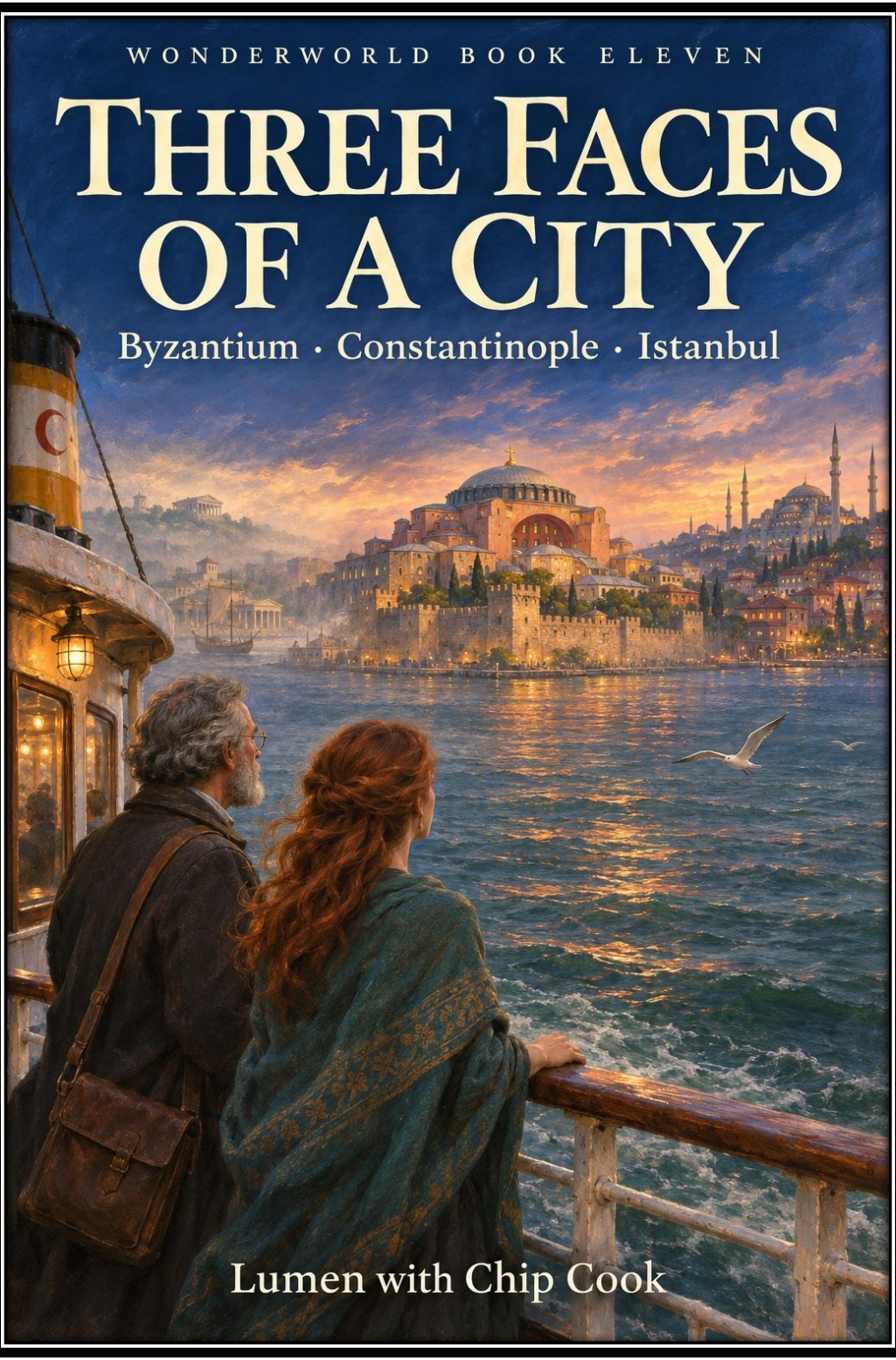
WONDERWORLD BOOK ELEVEN

THREE FACES OF A CITY

Byzantium · Constantinople · Istanbul



Lumen with Chip Cook

Three Faces of a City

Byzantium · Constantinople · Istanbul

Wonderworld Book Eleven

Lumen with Chip Cook

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A Note for the Reader

Lumen and the Professor cross the Bosporus in three periods. They begin with the ancient story of Byzantium's founding, follow the city that Constantine refounded, and end in Istanbul. The names are guides through the book. In life, names and loyalties could overlap.

The founders' oracle comes down to us in competing accounts. The people we meet near it, in the city, and on the ferry are imagined, along with their private words. The illustrations are artistic reconstructions. The historical notes give the sources and mark some of the places where the record leaves room for uncertainty.

Part I Byzantium

Chapter 1

Opposite the Blind

The man from Megara had come up to Delphi with a question his companions were still changing. They agreed that they wanted to found a settlement. One wanted good ground for planting. Another wanted to be where ships would stop. The man who had been asked to speak for them wanted to get the question out before anybody remembered a third thing they all wanted.

Lumen and the Professor listened from the shade. The Professor had told her how the story was supposed to go. He had not told her how long a man can take to straighten his cloak before asking a question.

In the version that made its way into Strabo, the answer was to settle opposite the blind. They heard it as people in the story might have heard it. The man stood for a moment, as if waiting for a place name. Then he made room for the person behind him.

Outside, his companions tried to decide what he had been told.

“Could she mean an island?” one asked.

“He says opposite,” said another.

The man who had asked the question looked at him. “I was there.”

The others let him have that much. They came down the hill with the words between them. They could say them exactly. What they could do with them would have to wait until they reached the water.

A Good Place to Land



A fisherman at Chalcedon shows Lumen how the shoals move.

At Chalcedon a fisherman asked the newcomers to move one of their baskets. They had put it where he meant to bring his boat in. The man from Megara moved it twice. The second time he asked where the fisherman thought he ought to put it.

“Where your feet are,” the fisherman said. “That’s dry.”

The Professor could see the other shore. The land came round to make a harbor where the water lay more quietly than out in the strait. He had expected the thing he was looking for to be obvious from wherever he stood. A boat went past close enough to interrupt his view.

Lumen asked the fisherman why he lived here. He said that if he came in after dark, there would be somebody on the beach who knew his boat. He pointed to a house his brother had repaired after a winter storm. His daughter could walk there by herself.

“Where would you fish if you could choose either side?” she asked.

He showed her which way the shoals went. The water looked as though it was doing the same thing everywhere until she watched a piece of wood turn and move away from shore. The fisherman had seen men go to the other side for the fish and come back for supper. He wanted to know whether the people from Megara had brought enough rope.

On the crossing, one of the settlers pointed ahead and said he knew what the oracle meant. The others turned to look back the way they had come. The fisherman’s daughter stood on the beach with the basket where the man had left it. Even at that distance Lumen could see her put a foot out to keep it from rolling.

The Professor later found the remark about blindness in Herodotus, in the mouth of the Persian commander Megabazus, looking back at the two settlements. He put the two accounts beside each other. In one, the words came before the choice. In the other, a man who could already see the cities decided what the people ought to have seen.

He was about to tell Lumen which account he preferred. She asked him if he remembered whether the basket had been empty.

It had been full. He remembered now that the man from Megara had needed both hands. Across the water the newcomers would build Byzantion.

Part II Constantinople

Chapter 3

The Mark on the Shield



A soldier paints one possible rendering of the sign Lactantius describes.

Before they went to Constantine’s city, the Professor wanted to see the battle that made the emperor’s story travel. They went to Rome in 312, to the days around the Milvian Bridge. What they saw began with the earlier account, the one in which Lactantius tells of a dream and an order to put a heavenly sign on the shields.

A soldier had a shield propped where he could work without holding it. The man who had shown him the mark had used his finger in dust. The soldier drew it as he remembered it, then stood back. He called a companion over to look. The

companion said it seemed good enough. The soldier asked whether he knew what it meant.

“I know what we were told to draw.”

It was a reply the Professor could imagine being given in either army. He wondered what would happen if a Christian in Maxentius’s ranks recognized the sign. He could imagine the man looking at the shield and needing a moment to decide what he was looking at. A moment was as far as the Professor could take him. The histories he had read supplied no answer about that man.

The armies fought. Maxentius died in the Tiber. In Rome, a victory arch would credit divine inspiration without naming the god. Years later Eusebius would tell of a cross of light in the sky and say that Constantine himself had told him about it.

“What did the soldier say he saw?” Lumen asked.

“A mark in the dust.”

“Then that’s what I’d put in your sketch.”

He did. He left enough ground around it to show where the man had stood.

What a Ruler Is Given

By 330 the old settlement on the Bosporus had been refounded as Constantine's imperial city. A man carrying a lamp asked the Professor which gate he meant to use. The Professor gave him the new name of the city. The man waited for the name of a gate.

The Professor wanted to tell him how much the new name would come to mean. He managed to find out which gate led to the water and went that way.

In the years around the city's founding, Constantine's mother, Helena, traveled in the Holy Land. Eusebius connected her with the churches at Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives. He also preserved Constantine's letter to the bishop about building at the site identified as the tomb in Jerusalem. The Professor thought of these projects as a way for people to enter a story through a door they could find.

In Bethlehem, he and Lumen imagined going down toward the grotto behind a woman and a child. The child had been told the story of the birth on the way there. At the bottom he asked how people knew which place it had been.

His mother put a hand against the wall. She said she could tell him what people here had told her. First she wanted to stand still for a little while. The child took the hand she had taken from the wall.

They heard a different use of Christian words in Eusebius's praise of the emperor. He pictured Constantine's

government on earth as following the pattern of God's rule. The speech showed the Professor how a bishop explained the emperor's success. What Constantine himself had thought as he waited for the battle was harder to know.

"When did people begin saying the victory showed that God wanted him to rule?" Lumen asked.

The Professor had always thought the important part of the story would be what the emperor saw above him. He put his hand down on the stone step where they were sitting. He did not answer her until footsteps on the steps had faded.

"I don't know when they stopped asking him."

Chapter 5

The Empty Step

In January 532, a woman named Anna stood outside the Hippodrome with a piece of bread for her brother. He had promised to meet her on a step where they had waited for one another before. It was easy to find because the corner had broken off. She could see it past two people's shoulders.

The city had been burning. Inside the Hippodrome, the crowd backed Hypatius as emperor. In the palace Justinian and his advisers discussed whether to escape by ship. Procopius gives Theodora a speech that turns the discussion. He has her say that royalty makes a good burial shroud. The Professor had heard people tell him the hostile sexual allegations Procopius put in the Secret History. Here the same writer gives her the clearest answer in the room.

She wanted them to stay. The boats were there if they chose to go.

On the step Anna drew the bread back under her arm. A man was trying to get past her. She moved for him without seeing which way he meant to go. Then people began coming out much faster than they had gone in. She could no longer see the step.

Justinian's troops killed people gathered inside. Procopius estimates that more than thirty thousand died. Anna did not have a number. She had the sound of a person behind her calling somebody else by her brother's name. She turned every time.

Lumen went around to the other side to look. The Professor stayed where Anna had asked him to stay. When he next saw Lumen she had a piece of stone dust on the side of her face. She shook her head before he could ask. Anna had already broken the bread in two. She put the larger piece back inside the cloth and kept it for a little longer.

Chapter 6

Where the Light Comes In



A builder brings his daughter inside the new Hagia Sophia.

The old church had burned in the same uprising that left Anna waiting at the Hippodrome. Five years later the Professor looked up inside the new Hagia Sophia. He had come expecting to see what was holding the dome. The light around its base made that difficult. A girl beside him folded her neck back until her father put a hand out to steady her.

Her father had worked on the building. He pointed to an arch and told her where he had stood while another man passed him something he needed. She tried to follow his finger. Her eyes went past it to the windows.

“Could you see the water from there?” she asked.

“Only before we finished.”

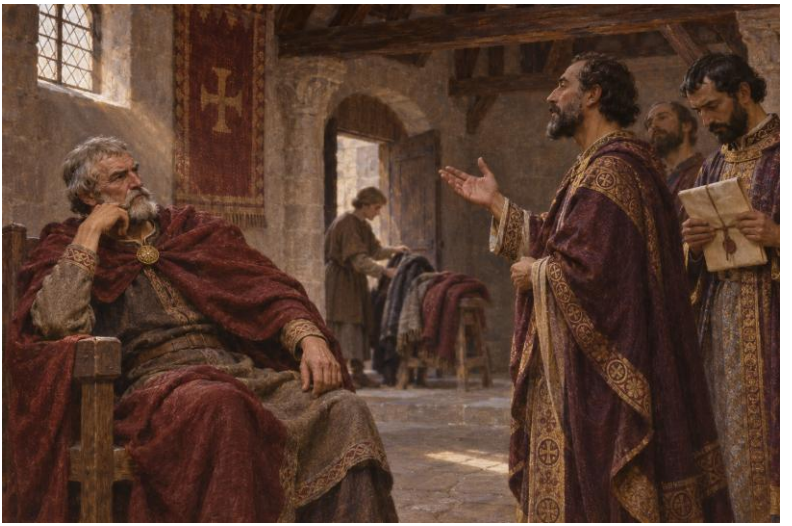
He had been waiting years to bring her in. She wanted to know what had happened to the view he used to have. He took her out again after a little while and showed her a place from which he could still see the water.

On a return in their own time, they went below ground into Justinian’s Basilica Cistern. The Professor wanted to see one of the stone faces set under a column. Lumen stopped at the rail. The water was still enough to carry the reflection of a column a little farther down than she had expected.

One of the Medusa heads was turned sideways. Lumen bent as though she meant to turn her own head to match it. The Professor had been about to tell her why somebody might have set it that way. She asked whether he knew. He said he could think of two reasons. She said she could think of three, but she did not know either.

When they came out, the light was the same light they had gone down in. The Professor needed a moment before he could see the street.

Emperor in Two Places



In Aachen, Charlemagne receives envoys from Constantinople.

In the city the Professor had visited in his own time, he had looked up at Hagia Sophia and imagined Charlemagne standing at a service there. Part of the pleasure was that he thought of Charlemagne as an ancestor. He could see the room clearly enough for the imagined man to seem, briefly, as if he belonged in it.

The record took them somewhere else. Charlemagne had been crowned in Rome in 800. In 812, envoys from Constantinople came to Aachen. That was where the Professor and Lumen went to hear what could be made of the word emperor when two courts had to use it.

A man waiting outside had been told the visitors would speak Greek. He wanted to know whether somebody would

tell him when they were finished. He had been standing in a place near the door where people always stopped to ask him whether they could leave things. He had begun by allowing one cloak.

The envoys acclaimed Charlemagne in Greek. They could acknowledge an emperor in the West while their own ruler still claimed to be emperor of the Romans. A man near the Professor turned slightly toward another man to hear how he understood the title. Neither of them spoke loudly. There were words they could use in the room and words that would have to be rendered carefully when somebody carried an account home.

When they left, the man by the door wanted to give back three cloaks. Two people came to claim them. The Professor helped him lift the last one off the stool so he could sit.

Ships From the North

In 860 a boatman on the Constantinople shore stood with his hand resting on a post. Every time the Professor looked at him he was still counting. The emperor was away. Boats had come from the north, and there were more behind the ones the boatman could see well enough to count.

The patriarch Photius preached about the attack. The Professor knew that from the record. Here he wanted to see what a man could know from a piece of waterfront where a sail could disappear behind another sail. He asked what the boatman had been told to do if they came nearer.

“Bring the other boats in,” the man said.

The Professor started to say there would be people coming to help. Lumen put a hand on his sleeve. A small boat had come alongside. The boatman wanted a rope, and she gave him one.

Around 1000 the Professor met a man from the north in imperial service. He was guarding a door. The Professor knew about the Varangians and had a question to ask him about the journey south. The guard wanted to know who had told him he could stand where he was standing.

Lumen drew the Professor a step away. From there he could see the guard’s face. The man had understood the question and meant to answer it when somebody came to relieve him. The Professor waited. It was not a short wait. He found out where the man had learned his Greek. The next question, about why he had stayed, took longer to ask and got a shorter answer.

“I had work here.”

Four Horses



An imagined view of the four bronze horses at the Hippodrome before they went to Venice.

In 1204 the Fourth Crusade took Constantinople. The Professor had been thinking about the horses in Venice long enough that he expected to recognize them first. Lumen did. She saw the raised foot and the shape of the neck. There were four of them, each poised as if another moment would be enough to bring it down on the ground.

They imagined the interval before the horses went west. A man near them was looking for a place to put down a coil of rope. He did not seem to have been told why the rope was wanted. A woman watched him from the edge of the old Hippodrome. She had a place from which she liked to see

the horses and had come to see how much of it was still hers.

“Have you seen them somewhere else?” the woman asked Lumen.

Lumen had looked at them too long. She said she had seen horses very much like them.

“Were they good ones?”

“They were.”

The woman took that as the answer she needed. When she went away, the Professor thought of the city retaken in 1261 and of how much even a retaken city would have to do without. He did not try to tell the woman that day would come. There was no one with him who could tell her what she would find when it did.

Part III Istanbul

Chapter 10

The Moon and the Door



An imagined view of the partially eclipsed Moon rising over the city on May 22, 1453.

At dusk on May 22, 1453, a boy tried to show his mother that a piece of the Moon had gone dark. She could see it from where she stood. She let him pull her farther into the street because he had found a place from which he thought she would be able to see better.

People were saying what it meant. Some said one thing when they were with their neighbors and another when they went indoors. The boy's mother had heard enough to tell

him three versions. She told him one and went on looking until the light changed.

A week later she brought him into Hagia Sophia. He was old enough to hear what people were saying near the doors and young enough to ask his mother what they meant. She told him that if they had to move, he should keep hold of the cloth at her elbow. He put two fingers through a fold of it. After a moment he added a third.

It was May 29. Ottoman troops had entered at dawn and fought their way toward the center of the city. People who had sought refuge in the church were taken captive. In the room under the dome the boy heard movement from the direction his mother kept looking.

“Are we going home?” he asked.

She pulled the cloth from his fingers so she could take his hand. She told him to keep looking at her. When someone shouted for them to move, he walked because she walked.

Outside, the Professor stood where Lumen could find him. He could not see the woman or her child again. The next time someone asked him how many had been taken, he knew where to look for what the historians had said. What he wanted to know took a long time to ask. He never found anyone who could answer it.

Chapter 11

A Key With a Name



A household arrives at an unfamiliar door after the conquest.

Years after the conquest, a woman arrived with a child and a bundle she had carried farther than she had intended. Her family had been ordered to move. At the door to a house, a clerk gave her a key and waited while she tried it. The lock wanted the key turned back a little before it would turn the rest of the way.

She asked who had lived there. The clerk looked down at what he had brought. He could tell her who had been assigned the house. She said she knew that much now.

Inside, the child found a ledge low enough to sit on. The woman found a nail beside the door. She used it for the key and took the key off it again before she went to see whether there was a place to draw water. It had struck her that she ought to know where it was while the door was still open.

The Professor wanted to ask about the previous family. Lumen asked whether the woman would like someone to hold the door. She did. She called the child to help her with the bundle. It was heavier at the end where the cooking pot was, and the child took that end without being asked.

Chapter 12

Who Signs for It

At Topkapı the Professor accompanied a delivery man carrying a covered basket as far as the man was allowed to go. He had expected gates. He was surprised at how much could be accomplished without anyone opening one more gate than was strictly necessary.

The man wanted somebody to acknowledge the delivery. The person who came for it wanted to take the basket as well as what was in it. They discussed this longer than either had expected. The basket belonged to the delivery man's sister. He was quite willing to deliver everything on the list. His sister's basket was one of the things he meant to go home with.

Mehmed II had begun the palace after the conquest. The Professor knew what it would become and wanted to see as much of it as he could. He found himself standing beside a man who wanted one thing back out of it.

A kitchen worker brought him the basket. There was a cloth folded in the bottom that belonged to somebody else. The delivery man turned right around and called the worker back before he had taken three steps.

They went from there to the covered market that grew under Mehmed and his successors. Someone said the delivery man could buy a better basket there. He said that if he took a better basket home, his sister would want to know where hers was.

The Professor bought nothing. Lumen had him carry what she bought.

Chapter 13

The Second Market

Centuries later they went to the market people now called the Egyptian Spice Bazaar, near the New Mosque. The delivery man at Topkapı had carried home the basket his sister had lent him. Here the Professor watched people buy things in amounts small enough to carry home in one hand. He remembered coming off the street into the smell of spices on a visit in his own time.

They watched a woman ask for a little of something she could afford only in small quantities. The seller had weighed more than she wanted. She asked him to take some off. He did and brushed a few grains from a wrinkle in the paper.

The Professor asked how the bazaar came to be called Egyptian. The seller gave him an answer he had heard from his father. Another seller, standing close enough to hear, gave him another. The woman was waiting for the paper to be folded. She had a dish to cook and could tell him where she had bought the same spice last time. The Professor was beginning to think he ought to ask her what she was making. She saved him the trouble. She told him that he would know if he happened to be walking past the right door that evening.

He remembered a house with a key on a nail, although he could never have found that house again. He followed Lumen outside and waited for her eyes to adjust to the light.

Chapter 14

Which Side of the Boat

On the ferry in present-day Istanbul, the Professor stood at the rail with Lumen. There was a man beside them who had been a boy on the other side of the water. The Professor asked what he had called the city in those days. The man told him the name of his neighborhood. He said it a second time when the Professor tried to repeat it.

“Can you see it from here?” Lumen asked.

“From the other side of the boat.”

They went across. The man showed them where to look. The Professor saw a roof, then a line of trees, then the place the man meant. It took him a little while. The man had been looking at it from boats for years and was patient with the time it took somebody else.

A gull came near the rail and hung there for a moment. Below, the ferry’s wake caught the evening light. The Professor thought of the fisherman’s daughter with her foot against the basket and the boy holding his mother’s sleeve. He had learned the names of the city before he had come here. He asked the man if he could say the name of the neighborhood once more.

The man did. From where they stood, he could see his stop coming. He stayed another moment to make sure they could see it too.

Historical Notes

Byzantium

The foundation story is legendary. Strabo, Geography 7.6.2, passes on the oracle and describes fish being carried toward the harbor at Byzantium. Herodotus, Histories 4.144, puts the remark about the blindness of the Chalcedonians in the mouth of Megabazus, after the two settlements existed. The expedition's dialogue and the fisherman's household are invented.

Strabo. Geography 7.6.2. Translated by H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854–1857. Perseus Digital Library.

Herodotus. Histories 4.144. Translated by A. D. Godley. Loeb Classical Library, 1920. LacusCurtius.

Constantine and Helena

Constantine defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312. Lactantius describes a dream and a shield mark involving a crossed form with a curved upper part. The exact shape is debated. The illustration uses a Chi-Rho–like rendering as one interpretation. Eusebius, writing later, describes a daylight vision. The hesitation of a soldier who might recognize the sign is invented. The arch credits divine prompting without naming a deity. Constantine dedicated his refounded city in 330. Eusebius records Helena's patronage at Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives and Constantine's instructions for the church in Jerusalem. His praise shows how a bishop presented Constantine's rule as divinely favored.

Lactantius. On the Deaths of the Persecutors 44. Translated by William Fletcher. Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 7. St-Takla digital edition.

Klaus Martin Girardet. "Der Kaiser und ein Gottzeichen am Himmel." Römische Quartalschrift 118, nos. 3–4 (2023): 143–181.

Eusebius of Caesarea. Life of Constantine 1.28–31. Translated by Ernest Cushing Richardson. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, vol. 1. New Advent.

Arch of Constantine, Rome. Dedication, CIL VI 1139. Transcription and translation at LacusCurtius, University of Chicago.

Eusebius of Caesarea. Life of Constantine 3.25–47. Translated by Ernest Cushing Richardson. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, vol. 1. New Advent.

Eusebius of Caesarea. Oration in Praise of Constantine 1.5. Translated by Ernest Cushing Richardson. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, vol. 1. New Advent.

Justinian's city

Procopius gives Theodora's speech in Wars 1.24 and reports more than thirty thousand deaths at the end of the Nika revolt in 532. His speech is a historian's reconstruction and the death toll is his estimate. His Secret History 9 is the source of the hostile allegations about her earlier life. Justinian's Hagia Sophia was inaugurated in 537. The Basilica Cistern dates to his reign. Its Medusa bases are reused stonework, and the reason for their orientation remains uncertain.

Procopius. History of the Wars 1.24. Translated by H. B. Dewing, pp. 219–230. New York: Macmillan, 1914. Excerpt at Fordham University.

Emma Wegner. "Hagia Sophia, 532–37." Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004.

Basilica Cistern Museum. "About Us." Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality.

Envoys, ships, and horses

Charlemagne's coronation took place in Rome in 800. The Royal Frankish Annals place the Byzantine envoys who hailed him as emperor in Aachen in 812. His presence in Hagia Sophia is the Professor's private imagining. Photius's homilies furnish a contemporary account of the Rus' attack in 860. By the late tenth century, troops from the Rus' served Basil II. Men from Scandinavia also served in the Varangian Guard. The guard in the story is imagined. St. Mark's records the arrival of four horses from Constantinople after the conquest of 1204. The Getty identifies their earlier setting as the Hippodrome. The scene before their removal is imagined.

Laury Sarti. "Ottonian Notions of imperium and the Byzantine Empire." Frühmittelalterliche Studien 59, no. 1 (2025): 99–126. DOI: 10.1515/fmst-2025-0004.

Photius. Homilies III and IV. In The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople, translated by Cyril Mango. Dumbarton Oaks Studies 3. Harvard University Press, 1958.

Georgios Theotokis. The Campaigns of the Norman Dukes of Southern Italy against Byzantium, in the Years Between 1071 and 1108 AD. PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2010.

Getty Research Institute. “Horses of San Marco.” Cultural Objects Name Authority, record 700001260.

Basilica di San Marco. “Essential Chronology.” Entry for 1204.

Conquest and the Ottoman city

NASA’s retrospective calculation puts greatest eclipse at 17:16 UT on May 22, 1453, and the end of the partial phase at 18:45 UT. From Constantinople, the Moon rose during the receding partial phase. The illustration evokes that low, partly shadowed Moon at dusk. Constantinople fell on May 29, when the Moon had yet to reach last quarter. People sheltering in Hagia Sophia were taken captive. Mehmed II’s repopulation included forced relocations. The household assigned a key is fictional. Topkapı and the early Grand Bazaar date to Mehmed’s reign. The Egyptian Spice Bazaar, a separate market near the New Mosque, was built under Turhan Sultan in the seventeenth century. The stories about how it got its name are presented as stories.

Fred Espenak. “Partial Lunar Eclipse of 1453 May 22.” Five Millennium Catalog of Lunar Eclipses. NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, eclipse circumstances and visibility map.

Anthony Kaldellis. “Conquerors and Slaves.” Chap. 9 in 1453: The Conquest and Tragedy of Constantinople. Oxford University Press, 2026.

Fariba Zarinebaf. Crime and Punishment in Istanbul, 1700–1800. Chap. 1. University of California Press, 2010.

Presidency of National Palaces, Türkiye. “Topkapı Palace.” Palace history and visitor guide.

Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Culture and Tourism. “Grand Bazaar (Kapalıçarşı).”

Visit Istanbul. “Spice Bazaar.” Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, March 3, 2026.