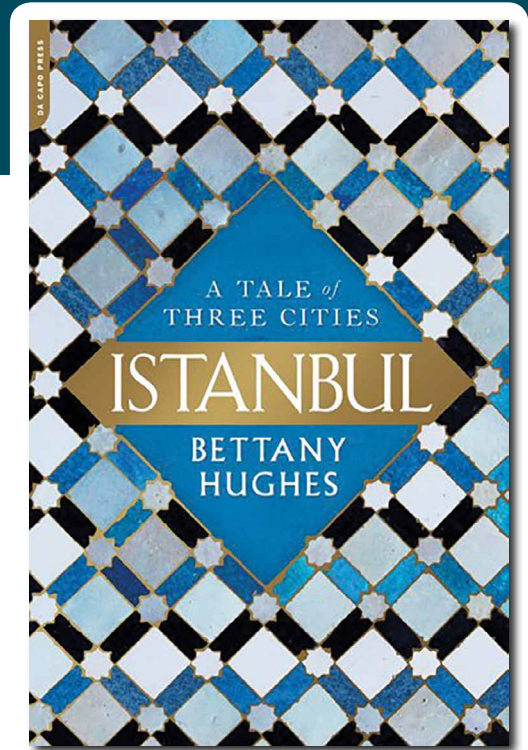


# REVIEW ESSAY

## Istanbul

### A Tale of Three Cities

Bettany Hughes, Da Capo Press,  
New York, 2017, 856 pages



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Professor Bettany Hughes, scholar at Oxford University, research fellow at Kings College London, and presenter on BBC, displays her academic prowess and superb storytelling abilities in *Istanbul: A Tale of Three Cities*. This exemplary work illuminates the polis successively called Byzantium, Constantinople, and Istanbul; the guardian of the channel between two continents. The author divides eight thousand years of history into eight distinct parts. In six hundred pages, she deftly informs readers about this city on the north shore of the Bosphorus Strait. Commencing with Thracian “barbarians,” Istanbul concludes with the unsuccessful coup attempt on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Hughes employs seventy-eight easily readable chapters to convey a grand narrative that intersperses comments about anthropology, archeology, art, culture, economics, literature, philosophy, politics, strategy, and theology. The book cites 966 notes, which leverage a fifty-seven-page bibliography, and a twenty-eight-page timeline summarizes key events.

The ten chapters in Part 1 recount the era prior to Roman Emperor Constantine the Great. Greeks in

antiquity explored and colonized the coastlines around the Marmara and Black Seas and the interconnecting Bosphorus. This evolved into trade with existing Thracian and Phoenician settlements. However, the Thracian settlements on that wedge of land eluded subjugation; they remained in possession of the land’s natural harbors, maritime bounty, and surrounding fertile ground; the hills, river, and seas provided defensible terrain. Thracian control of the region endured until 667 BC. That year, the mercantile Greek city-state Megara (itself a colony of Corinth and ally of Sparta) sent armed settlers under the leadership of Byzas; they “founded” Byzantium, and its classical Greek name became Latinized to Byzantium. Hughes describes how prior to the Peloponnesian War, the city indirectly founded by Sparta fell to Persia, became “liberated” after a naval victory at Salamis by a Spartan who ruled as a tyrant, then was subjugated by Athens who interceded on behalf of the people, removed the tyrant, and acquired Byzantium to secure its Black Sea grain supply and tax commerce. The Romans built the road Via Egnatia to link the

Ionian Sea to the Bosphorus; this connected the Roman Empire to Byzantium. That road permitted the movement of troops, treasure, and taxes. This set the stage for Emperor Vespasian in AD 73 to incorporate Byzantium into the empire.

The story of Emperor Constantine opens Part 2. In three chapters, the illegitimate son of a military leader achieves victory in Rome in AD 312, issues the Edict of Toleration that ceased persecution of Christians in AD 313, and removes coemperor and rival Licinius in AD 324—defeating him after a siege at a town in Asia Major along the Bosphorus. Hughes posits that Byzantium’s stout walls and strategic location, combined with Constantine’s preference for frontiers and distaste of Rome, influenced him to choose Byzantium as his new capital. The remaining thirteen chapters depict Byzantium’s transition from a strategic border city to an imperial secular and religious capital. Hughes describes theological issues and the development of the Nicene Creed; the impact of Constantine’s mother Helena; the migration of the Goths; the influence of ascetics, eunuchs, culture, education, and libraries; Vandals and Huns; and the rebuilding of the walls that deterred Attila from laying siege and attacking into Europe. It concludes with the fall of “Old Rome.”

Part 3 describes the “Golden Age” of Constantinople, AD 476–565, the era of the

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Byzantine Empire’s greatest expansion. Its nine chapters revolve around the rise, rule, and reforms of Justinian and his wife and coregent, Theodora. These chapters address the invitation Justinian received to join his uncle Justin—former pig farmer, soldier, general, then commander of the imperial guard in Constantinople; Theodora’s backstory, journeys, and faith; the impact of earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, coups, and reprisals; and the

compilation of canonical and civil codes that created a codex that formed the basis of Western law.

In contrast with that short period, silk and the Silk Road, trade, Islam, Vikings, and Saxons appear across the nine chapters of Part 4, AD 565–1050. Nestorian monks smuggled silkworms out of Tajikistan, across the Caspian Sea, over the Caucasus, and into Constantinople. This initiated the silk industry that prospered due to imperial support. The Silk Road permitted New Rome’s missionaries to travel to India, Sri Lanka, and China; trade and ideas flowed both ways. The discovery of Byzantine coins and pottery from China to Cornwall reveals the extent of Constantinople’s trade. Within fifty years of Islam’s founding in AD 622, its explosion out of the Arabian Peninsula resulted in Constantinople losing two-thirds of its territory. Muslim fleets unsuccessfully attacked Constantinople five times between 661 and 750, after which there were no further siege attempts of Constantinople until the fourteenth century. Hughes opines that the loss of Egyptian grain focused Byzantium’s attention north on conversion of and trade with the Slavs. This created encounters with the Vikings; amber, raiders, and traders flowed south, while silk, Hellenization, and Christianity traveled north. By AD 988, Vladimir, the youngest son of a former Viking leader who raided Byzantium, accepted Christianity and married Byzantine Emperor Basil’s sister, Anna. He sent six thousand Vikings—the Varangian—to Constantinople to put down a rebellion and assist with security. One ex-Varangian named Harald returned to Norway, and in 1066, he invaded England, only to be defeated by the Anglo-Saxon King Harold. In turn, Harold lost three weeks later to William of Normandy. Saxons who fled Norman occupation served as mercenaries in Constantinople.

Parts 5 and 6 address the schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the Crusades, the Turks, Ottoman encirclement of Constantinople, and its fall in 1453. In these fourteen chapters, Hughes adds detail and depth to events often glossed over and emphasizes the importance of “the story” over the facts. Byzantium’s military embarrassment in 1071 at Manzikert results in competing narratives of victory and decline. Emperor Diogenes’s unsuccessful

attempt to stem the advance of the Seljuk Turks across Byzantine lands had three major consequences. First, the Turkish victory galvanized their tribes, increased their ambitions, and emboldened the Turkic polity. Second, the West believed that Byzantium could no longer protect the Christian east. Third, Constantinople decided to invite the West to assist in its security, resulting in the Crusades.

Conventional wisdom conveys that participants of the Fourth Crusade, on their way to the Holy Land in 1204, decided to stop and sack Constantinople. Hughes gives the back story: this occurred only after Prince Alexios, son of the previously deposed Emperor Isaac II, failed to pay the debt he owed the Venetians for putting him on the throne the preceding year. Seeking recompense for their investment, the Venetian elite reminded the crusaders of centuries-old “doctrinal disputes,” leveraged new siege weapons, emplaced siege ladders on their ships’ masts to aid getting over the walls, and seized the city. They carted off treasures back to Venice and set fires in Constantinople that destroyed homes, libraries, and the silk industry, which never recovered. Over time, Ottoman forces enveloped the capital. After eight hundred years of coveting the city, Muslims acquired Constantinople; it fell to them in 1453. Seizure and regime change required preparation and allies. The author informs readers that the Ottomans had inhabited part of Constantinople fifty years before Mehmed the Conqueror’s cannons bombarded the walls. He spared attacking the island of Galata as quid pro quo for Genoese merchant cooperation in taking the city.

Ottoman expansion from Konstantiniyye—later rebranded as “Islam-bol,” for “Islam abounds”—its later demise, and its role in modern day Turkey occupy the remaining twenty chapters in Parts 7 and 8. As ruler, Mehmed quickly instituted an Ottoman taxation scheme to turn his military victory into an economic success, and he commenced the construction of a new imperial palace. Originally an administrative center, the palace became a large and lavish sacred fortress that provided religious justification for dominance. Hughes describes its grandeur and splendor. Within seven years, the Ottoman capital moved there from Edirne, the former Adrianople in Thrace, founded by Roman

Emperor Hadrian. Within sixty years, the Sunni Ottomans overcame challenges in their territory from the Persians, claimed that the Sunni Mamluks in Egypt supported the Shia Persians, and declared holy war to justify their expansion through the Middle East and North Africa. In the process, the Ottomans conquered Mecca, Medina, and Cairo. As a result, the Ottomans controlled the Hajj route to Mecca, the Mufti in Cairo became the Grand Mufti of the Ottoman Empire, and Ottoman politicians and Sunni clerics could argue that the sultan in Istanbul was Islam’s caliph.

Istanbul became a center for trade and refuge; when Ferdinand II and Isabella I of Spain expelled the Jews from Spain in 1492, the Sultan welcomed them into the Ottoman Empire. Hughes asserts how England’s Henry VIII fancied Turkish styles at court. In 1570, while other European powers formed the Holy League to protect Christian interests in the eastern Mediterranean from Turkic advances, Elizabeth I allied with the Ottomans to protect extensive trade and economic interests. The author depicts Istanbul’s various engagements with Arabs, Europeans, Persians, and Russians; human trafficking in the form of janissaries and the white slave trade; smallpox; textiles; and tulips. She continues with Western support for nationalist groups seeking independence from Ottoman rule and the experiment with the secularization of society.

Students and readers of history, whether of classical, medieval, European, Mid-Eastern, or military, will find *Istanbul* an asset. Military history appears predominately at the political-military and theater-strategic levels. Those previously only exposed to American or West European history will find this a superb book to expand their perspective; it makes an outstanding relevant text for any world history or global studies reading list.

The Brits demarcated the globe for navigational purposes and ran the “0 degree” longitude, the boundary between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres, through Greenwich. After devouring *Istanbul: A Tale of Three Cities*, one can assert that an alternative location that reflects the cultural, historical, political, and theological significance where East and West symbolically meet would be almost 29 degrees further east so that it runs through Istanbul. ■