



provides both a greater understanding of daily life in Byzantium, as well as a more unified, comprehensive picture of the city of Constantinople.

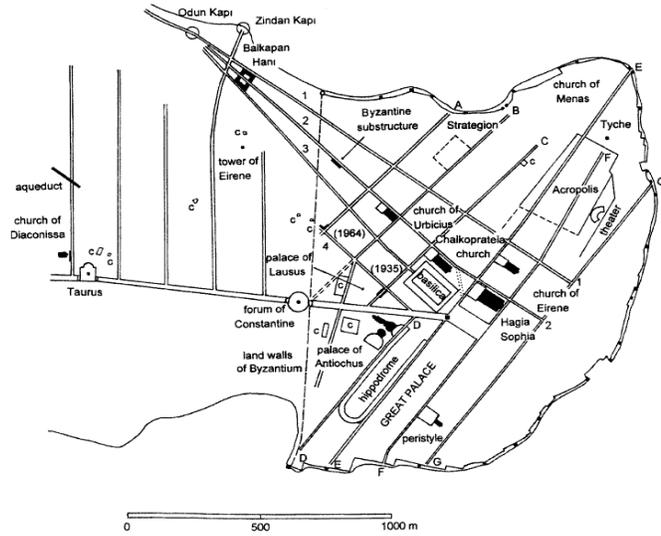
### **URBAN GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY**

Approximately 25 meters wide, the *mese* began at the Milion Stone, located in the Augusteum Square outside of the present day Hagia Sophia, and extended west past the edges of the Hippodrome, the Palaces of Lausus and Antiochus, through the Forum of Constantine and the Forum of Theodosius. Shortly after passing through the Constantinian Capitolium the road bifurcated, with one branch running northwest and ending at the Gate of Polyandri at the Theodosian Walls, and the other (more important) route heading southwest, passing through the Forums of Bovis and Arcadius before ending at the ceremonial Golden Gate, where it joined the *Via Egnatia*, the main road of the Roman Empire (Kuban 35.)

Some early form of the *mese* probably existed in the pre-Constantinople Roman settlement established by Septimus Severus as an extension of the *Via Egnatia*. The *Via Egnatia* was the main road of the Eastern Roman Empire, which wound through Greece and then eventually connected to the then small settlement of Byzantium. However, the *mese* of Constantinople can be dated to the founding of the city itself in 330 A.D (Kuban 72).

In addition to its centrality, running virtually along the “spine” of the city through almost every major monument and public space, the importance of the *mese* can also be seen in relation to other lesser road networks of the city. Relying on excavations completed in the 1930s by von Gerkan and Olof Dalman, Albrecht

Borger was also able to establish the comparative centrality and importance of the *mese* by studying the road layout of Constantinople (Berger 162). The three other “major roads” identified by Berger, “appear to radiate from a single point” forming a more or less rectangular pattern of urban pathways (Berger 165). In contrast, the “only major street that does not fit...is the main street,” which cut through the street pattern at a rectangular angle (Berger 165).



1 The old town of Byzantium and the new quarter next to the Golden Horn (c = cistern)

**Image 2 Road Patterns of Constantinople**  
 Berger, Albrecht. “Streets and Public Spaces in Constantinople.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 54, (2000).  
 Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.

Thus, similar to the large modern thoroughfares of Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C. or 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York City, the *mese* distinguished itself from lesser streets both in its size and through a conscientious disruption of the normal traffic pattern.

### **WHAT THE MESE LOOKED LIKE, THE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

The defining feature of the *mese* was the colonnaded porticoes that surrounded it. These porticoes, which were essentially large covered walkways that extended perpendicular to street on both sides, were filled with shops and other commercial enterprises, indicating that the *mese* served as the center of the city’s economic

activity. In addition to “providing a number of urban amenities, these [porticoes] created a visually rich urban atmosphere, where the noise and bustle of the crowds must have resembled our own modern shopping malls” (Kurban 44). The *Makros Embolos* (another street that ran north from the *mese*) connected a section of the *mese* to the harbors and trading centers of the Golden Horn, further adding to the commercial significance of the street (Khazdan). Finally, the major forums and gathering spaces bisected by the *mese* would have inevitably contained business activities, market areas and other economic enterprises. It is not clear whether these forums were also a source of commercial competition, diverting activity from the *mese*, or whether they were merely complimentary. In all likelihood, the primary purpose of the fora was as a gathering space for demonstrations, hangings, and other social events, complimented by the minor commercial activities that inevitably accompany large groups of people, while the *mese* itself remained the primary economic space.

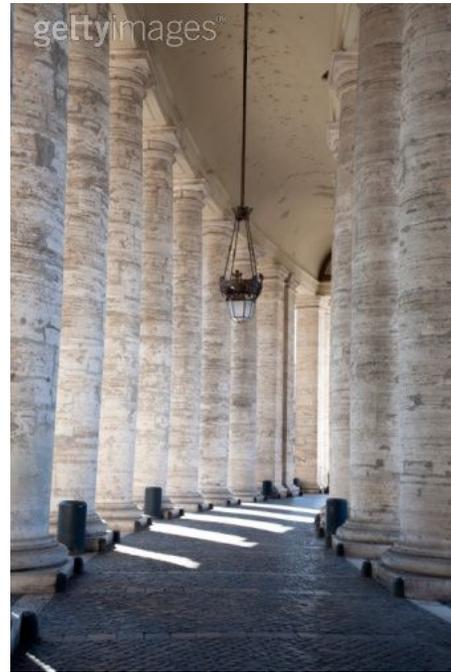


Image 3 Porticoed Road of St. Peters Square  
 Angelika Stern. Royalty Free, Getty  
<http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/88657137>

The porticoed street was itself not a new invention. A similar colonnaded road, named the “Great Colonnade” was discovered in the city of Palmyra, in present-day Syria, and dates to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium (Baranski 4). A similar ancient road, flanked by colonnades was found in the ancient Syrian town of Apamea, dating from the same time period (Balty Plate X).

In addition to the economic activity, the *mese* was also the social artery of Constantinople. Connecting virtually every major monument, public space, bath, market, monastery and church, the *mese* centralized and ordered the social and cultural life of the city's inhabitants. In comparison to the sprawling metropolis of today's Istanbul, it is easy to imagine that daily life for the average Byzantine citizen was clustered around this avenue. It was undoubtedly a place to see and be seen, the place where news was delivered and transmitted, and defined which spaces and areas were deemed cultural superior and relevant.

### **THE IMPERIAL SYMBOLISM**

In addition to its economic and cultural importance, the *mese* was also a tool to convey imperial power. The physical element of this symbolism was the continuation of the *Via Egnatia* (the main road of the Empire), demonstrating the connection between Constantinople and the larger Byzantine or Roman Empire. By connecting the *Via Egnatia* to the *mese*, Byzantine emperors expressed the shift in Imperial Power from Rome to Constantinople, as well as physically tying the city into the geography of the empire.

However, more significant than this was the triumphal procession down the *mese* undertaken by Byzantine Emperors who achieved military victories. As the Emperor marched from the Golden Gate to the Sacred Palace, all the while displaying the victories and spoils of their latest conquests, the commoners of the city were apparently expected to pack themselves alongside the *mese* in order to witness the

ostentatious display of Imperial power. In this way, the *mese* itself was turned into a tool to glorify the power of the Emperor (Mango 174).

Sadly, much of the architecture of Byzantium has been lost to us today, as Constantinople became Istanbul, and as Istanbul became a modern city. However, a large section of the *mese* survives under the Ottoman name *Divan Yolu*, meaning literally court road. By walking along the *Divan Yolu* (or taking the Zeytiburnu Kabata Tram), modern day visitors to the city can literally walk in the footsteps of the inhabitants of Constantinople. Starting at the Million Stone and heading westward, the *Divan Yolu* faithfully follows the *mese's* path until it reaches *Beyazit Square*, and provides a enjoyable (and historical) method for visitors to explore the ancient city.

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