

# Mythic CONSTANTINOPLE



Mythras

THE DESIGN  
MECHANISM

Mark Shirley



# Mythic CONSTANTINOPLE

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*Look, Mum – I finished it!*

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# INTRODUCTION

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*O imperial City, City fortified, City of the great king... Queen of the queen of cities, song of songs and splendour of splendours!*

*~ Niketas Choniates, c.1210*

**K**alos *‘elthete, philoi!* Welcome, friends! Welcome to MYTHIC CONSTANTINOPLE. The Queen of Cities sits like a jewel between Europe and Asia at the crossroads of the world. Seventy thousand people make their home here, although this is just a tenth of the populace at the empire’s apogee. The streets of Constantinople were first paved two thousand years ago and it had existed a thousand years before becoming the capital of the Roman Empire. No city in Europe has been continuously occupied by the same (if evolving) culture for as long as has Constantinople, which is why it is sometimes called The Eternal City. Westerners call it the City of Sin, a place of exotic vices and fulfilled lusts, a den of decadence where everything can be bought if you have deep enough pockets. To its inhabitants it is the Holy City, bastion of Orthodoxy and home to three thousand churches and four hundred monasteries; the piety of the people evident in the gem-crusted altars and the gilded ikons. Constantinople is all these things, and more.

In Constantinople you can find travellers from all over the known world: mercenaries from far off England and Russia rub shoulders with merchants from Venice and Tunis; and delegations from the Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk Sultanate face off against each other while the iron-clad Knights of Rhodes debate theology with Neoplatonist philosophers. If you are lucky you may even see fabulous visitors such as the headless *Blemmyai* and dog-headed men. Holy men harangue the crowd in a tongue everyone can understand regardless of their race, and wizards struggle to entertain jaded passers-by with their fire show, levitation or mind-reading spectacular. The sights, sounds, and smells of the city, so familiar to its inhabitants, can be overwhelming to the visitor fresh from the boat.

The year is 1450; or, as the Byzantines reckon it, the 6958th year since Creation. The weight of history contends with wonders of the modern world, such as the waterpowered blast furnace; letter press; the mechanical clock; the magnetic compass and other improvements in navigational aids; scientific advances in optics, hydraulics, and statics; and of course, gunpowder. This is an age of exploration, an age of invention, an age of intrigue, and an age of empires.

*This is MYTHIC CONSTANTINOPLE.*

## RELIGION

Religion is a major feature of the Mythic Constantinople setting. Even if you do not explore these themes directly in your game, the conflicts between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, and between Christianity and Islam, are powerful shaping forces of the city’s past and its future.

As a group, the Games Master and the players should take care not to offend the beliefs of each other in real life. Remember that these are real-world religions which today have millions of followers and you should be sensitive towards the beliefs of others and not run stories that your players would find uncomfortable.

## HOW MYTHIC?

Each Games Master should decide the level of supernatural influence there is in their game. The setting works as a purely historical setting, but the default is a moderate level of wonder and mystery, so for games without magic the Games Master will have to make a few adjustments. In the default setting, few people can use magic, but most know of someone who does – a local witch, herbalist, or holy man, for example. Mythical creatures might lurk beneath the surface of the city, but these are mostly tales told to frighten children rather than a daily occurrence. There are non-human races in Constantinople, but they are unusual rather than commonplace – people will stare should a dog-headed man walk down the Mese Odos, for example.

In a game where supernatural magic does not exist, all these things lapse into the realm of superstition. The inhabitants of Constantinople still visit witches and alchemists, but their business is a combination of fakery and pharmacy. The non-human races are reduced to tall tales brought back by travellers, and sorcerers confined to the pages of fairy tales.

If you want to make Mythic Constantinople even *more* mythic, then once again you will need to make a few adjustments. A game like this might have nearby nations populated by non-humans – perhaps Crete has a native populace of minotauroi, for example – and Folk Magic a common tool rather than a rare gift. In a high magic game, the Evil Eye becomes a real threat, causing ill luck and disease with just an envious glance.



## TERMINOLOGY

There is a bewildering mess of terminology in fifteenth century Constantinople. Contemporary inhabitants of the city think of “Greeks” as Ancient Greeks, calling themselves *Rhomanoi* (“Romans”) and their empire as the Empire of the Romans. However, these designations can be confusing for the modern reader so this book will refer to the Byzantine Empire and Greek culture in defiance of contemporary usage but in common with most modern source material.

Another potential point of confusion is the contemporary term for the people of Western Europe, who are collectively called Franks or Latins by the Byzantines regardless of their ethnic origin. Since the focus of this book is on the Byzantine culture, in this case contemporary usage will be adopted except where it is necessary to make a distinction.

Finally, the difference between culture and ethnicity is worth bringing up. Due to the diversity of the Eastern Mediterranean combined with historical and recent conquests, these two categories can be confusing. A Bulgarian might be ethnically a Slav, culturally Byzantine, but also a subject of the Ottoman Empire. Similar confusion happens on many of the Greek islands, where the Byzantine Greek inhabitants are ruled by Franks; and in the Mameluk Sultanate where the ruling caste is ethnically Turkic but culturally Egyptian.

## PRONUNCIATION

Where possible, Greek terms have been used in preference to Latin ones, reflecting the language of the Empire in the fifteenth century.

### PLURALISATION

Greek grammar is complex, and the pluralisation of words is not always straightforward. The most common plurals in medieval Greek are as follows:

- φ *~a* > *~ai*; except where neuter, then *~a* > *~ata*
- φ *~e* > *~ai*
- φ *~es* > *~es* (a change from a short ‘e’ to a long ‘e’)
- φ *~on* > *~a* or *~ontes*
- φ *~os* > *~oi*

### PRONUNCIATION OF GREEK

The conventional transliteration of medieval Greek words into Latin script does not always represent Byzantine pronunciation. The following is meant as a rough guide only; ultimately it does not matter how you pronounce a word as long as you can make yourself understood!

- φ *i*, *oi*, and final *-e* are all pronounced like *ee* in tree
- φ *-es* at the end of Greek words is pronounced as *ace* in pace, except in plural forms where it is pronounced as *ess* in less
- φ *au* and *eu* are pronounced respectively as *af* and *ef*
- φ *b* is pronounced as *v*
- φ *c* is pronounced as *k*, never as *s*
- φ *ch* is pronounced as in the Scottish loch
- φ *d* is pronounced as *th* in then
- φ *g* between two vowels is pronounced as the *y* in mayor; but otherwise is always as in *goat*, never as in *ginger*.
- φ *h* at the beginning of words is silent and sometimes written as an apostrophe
- φ *rh* is pronounced as *r*.

As a rule, Greek stresses the second to last syllable, or the third to last for longer words.

### PRONUNCIATION OF TURKISH

Fifteenth century Turkish is written using the Arabic script. It has been translated into modern Turkish orthography, which has some letters with specific pronunciations. All vowels are short unless indicated otherwise.

- φ *ö* is pronounced as *e* in learn
- φ *ü* is pronounced as *e* in new
- φ *c* is pronounced as *j* in judge
- φ *ç* is pronounced as *ch* in church
- φ *g* is pronounced as *g* in goat, never as in *ginger*
- φ *ğ* between two vowels puts a *y* or a *w* sound between them but glides the syllables together.
- φ *ğ* following a vowel lengthens the preceding vowel; so *ağ* is pronounced “aah”, *eğ* is pronounced “ay”, *iğ* is pronounced “ee”, *oğ* is pronounced “owe”, *uğ* is pronounced “oo”.
- φ *j* is pronounced as *s* in measure
- φ *ş* is pronounced as *sh* in fish

Turkish tends to stress the last syllable of a word. Long words which are the compound of shorter ones have multiple stressed syllables.

## GLOSSARY

Phonetic pronunciation guides for non-English words are given in parentheses. Stressed syllables are given in capitals.

**Allagion** (all-AY-ee-on, Greek): the basic unit of the Byzantine army, consisting of 300 stratiotai (q.v.) and lead by an allagator.

**Azymos** (ah-ZIE-moss, Greek): “without yeast”, an insult against Catholics who use unleavened bread for Holy Communion, something that the Orthodox Christians find sacrilegious. Anglicised as “azymite”.

**Demoi** (THEM-ee, Greek): the common people, singular demos.

**Devşirme** (dev-shur-ME, Turkish): a tax laid on Christian communities in Ottoman territory, forcing them to provide young boys for training as *yenicheris*.

**Dynatoi** (thy-NAT-ee, Greek): the ruling class, singular dynatos. *Frankokratia*: the period 1204–1261 when the Byzantine Empire was under the rule of Frankish warlords. Constantinople was the home of the Emperor of the Latins.

**Gavur** (djour, Turkish): “infidel”, an insult used to describe Christians.

**Kabbadion** (kav-VATH-ee-on, Greek): A garment worn as court regalia and indicative of high social status in Byzantine society. It is a floor-length robe with fitted sleeves, made of embroidered silk.

**Kephale** (keh-FAL-ay, Greek): the head of a district, elected from the people who live there.

**Logothetes** (loh-yoh-THE-ace, Greek): literally “one who calculates”, used as a title for several senior ministers of the Byzantine court.

**Makellos** (mah-KELL-os, Greek): a covered market.

**Mesazon** (may-SAZZ-on, Greek): the prime minister of the imperial court.

**Mese Odos** (MESS-ay OTH-os, Greek): the central street that runs through Constantinople. It divides into a northern branch and a southern branch at the Philadelphion, which terminate at the Gate of Charisios and the Golden Gate respectively.

**Mesoi** (MESS-ee, Greek): the middle class, singular mesos.

**Presbyteros** (pres-VIE-ter-os, Greek): an Orthodox priest.

**Restoration of the Empire, The**: reinstatement of the Byzantine Empire in 1261, when it was recaptured from Latin rule by Michael VIII Palaiologos. His dynasty has ruled ever since.

**Sack of Constantinople**: invasion and pillaging of Constantinople in 1204 by Frankish soldiers, the most part of the army of the Fourth Crusade.

**Stratiotes** (stra-TEE-oh-tace, Greek): a Byzantine soldier, plural stratiotai.

**Theotokos** (thee-oh-TOE-kos, Greek): the Virgin Mary; literally meaning “the God-bearer”.

**Tzykanion** (tzi-KAN-ee-on, Greek): a game like polo, played on horseback.

**Vardariotes** (var-tha-REE-oh-tace): a military regiment that acts as Constantinople’s police force, plural Vardariotai.

**Yeniçeri** (yen-NI-che-REE, Turkish): elite infantry unit of the Ottoman Empire, recruited via the devşirme (q.v.). Anglicised as “Janissary.”

## DISCLAIMER

This work is a fictional depiction of Constantinople in the fifteenth century. While best attempts have been made to present a historical setting, this book should not be considered an academic work. There are gaps in knowledge on the specifics of life at the end of the Byzantine Empire, and in building a coherent setting the missing details have been either assumed to be the same as a previous era or else details have been invented to fill in the gaps. Accuracy has been sometimes sacrificed for playability, and the focus has very much been on what would be the most entertaining details for a roleplaying game.

Not all anachronisms, omissions, and inaccuracies are deliberate. Some are undoubtedly accidental and the author takes full responsibility for any errors.

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