

The starting point of the roadmap of Constantinople – the Milion

The Milion was constructed in the early part of the 4th century by Constantine the Great in Constantinople, currently known as Istanbul, Turkey. It is located right in the center of the city and is known as the Golden Milestone. It is surrounded by the Basilica, the Hippodrome, and the Hagia Sophia. It lies to the east of Augustaeum and northwest of Hagia Sophia (Buzard 2014). It is also called the marmaroton, plakoton, arch or small dome (Eleni 2007).

The word Milion is derived from the Latin word *mille* which is a Roman unit of measurement of length. In those days, one *mille* was equal to 1,500 meters. In Rome, several *miliaria* lined the streets bearing inscriptions of distances, names of builders and emperors and other relevant locations and landmarks. Later, Augustus constructed the *Miliarium aureum* in the central part of Rome, which was a marble milestone with parts of gold. This became the standard from which distances from Rome to all other cities were measured. Slowly, other cities, including Constantinople, began mimicking this trend leading to the construction of the Milion, which true to its name, served as the standard from which distances to cities in the Roman Empire were measured and inscribed (Eleni 2007). This paper explores the different ways in which this famous historical structure has justified its name and the consequences of its erection.

The building is a tetrapylon i.e. a dome-shaped structure that rests on 4 large arches and is decorated with numerous statues and paintings. It is also known as a *quadrifons* or a four-faced gateway structure. The original column was made of gold. It bears the statues of Constantine and Helena, Constantine's mother, with a cross facing east. Behind them is a statue of Tyche of the city (Buzard 2014). However, according to documents belonging to that period, the statues of Constantine and Helena were sculpted to represent a Hekate. Similarly, the statue of Asklepios was metamorphosed to represent the statue of a bishop (Bassett 2005). It bears a

roof which was used by soldiers in 1182 conflict to fire at the opposite group of soldiers. The way to the roof was assumed to be a staircase in one of the piers which led up to a parapet. It is also assumed that the statues of Constantine and Helena were placed on the roof and other statues were placed around them giving the monument the feel of a temple. The vault of the monument bore a number of spectacular representations (Westbrook 2013). In the 6th century A.D., Emperor Justinian I placed a solar clock at the structure. By the 8th century A.D., the structure bore the representations of six Ecumenical Councils, which were later replaced by Emperor Constantine V (Eleni 2007).

When Constantine was fighting for control of the western side of the Roman Empire, he already had control of England and Gaul. He marched on Maxentius, who also wanted control of the west, fought and defeated him and gained control of the west. However, after a few years, not being satisfied with his current role, he defeated the emperor in the east and gained control of the entire empire. Following a dream, he converted to Christianity and constructed several churches in his region. He also decided to move his capital to another place and he chose the city of Byzantium. At the center of the city he constructed the Milion which served as the origin of the entire road network of his empire. He marched outward from the Milion in an attempt to define the boundaries of his new capital. He also constructed a number of other monuments and churches in his new capital city (Byzantium 2013).

Before the Milion was constructed, in 360 A.D., a church was constructed in the same location by Emperor Constantius II. However, it was burned down in 404 A.D. by the supporters of St. John Chryostorn. A second church was constructed by Theodosius II in 415 A.D.; however, it was destroyed by a fire which took place during the NIKA revolt in 532 A.D. against

Emperor Justinian I. Finally, a third church was built by Emperor Theodosius II in 537 A.D. which is now known as the Hagia Sophia (Kapsalis 1994).

It has seen the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453 and survived for another 50 years after that, however, it was lost by the beginning of the 16th century. Its last mention in documented literature is in 1268 A.D. The Milion was rebuilt by the Emperor Constantine I when he rebuilt the city of Byzantium, which became his new capital. He named this city 'New Rome' and tried to keep it as similar to 'Old Rome' as possible. He built the Milion as a tetrapylon which bore a dome-shaped structure, similar to the older monument. It was located near the old walls of Byzantium in the first region of the city, forming a bend at the beginning of the new city of Mese. Today, all that remains is just a stone which is a small fragment of the original structure located in the district of Eminonu in Cagaloglu, near the Basilica Cistern and on the north side of Hagia Sophia (Buzard 2014).

During the period of September to October 1952, excavations were conducted in the region to dig out a sewerage channel for the newly constructed law courts. These excavations uncovered four columns on bases against a Greenstone wall, which was assumed to be a part of the gate opening into the street of Athyr. It was later confirmed to be a part of the western wall of the forecourt of Hagia Sophia, to which the Steps of Athyr lead. Subsequent excavations in 1967-8 uncovered another column with finely carved moldings, similar to a column in the pier of a marble gate or arch. This location is suspected to be that on which the original Milion resided (Westbrook 2013).

During the reign of Emperor Constantine, architects were hired to trace the outline of a new city over the old one, which would become his capital. The hired professionals drew the outline such that there was a principal street running straight from the Milion to the Capitol along

1,850 meters. This street was called the *mese*, which soon became the hub of the city (Fontana-Giusti 2012).

Similar to the *Milliarium Aureum* in Rome, the *Milion* served as the point from where the distances of all roads that connected Constantinople to the cities of the Byzantine Empire were measured. It served as the starting point from where all roads to other European cities began. The base of the structure bore the inscriptions of all distances of roads connecting Constantinople to other cities (Buzard 2014). The roads starting from *Milion* went all the way to Spain, Iraq, Iran, Bulgaria and Egypt (Jean 2015).

When approaching the *Milion*, a person would pass through the Golden Gate of Constantinople, and approach the great dome of St. Sophia, the monument of Justinian and his architect, Anthemius, with the Hippodrome on his right side and the Imperial Palace or the Place of Augustus on his left, and see the *Milion* towards the north, standing as a roofed building with open sides and supported with seven pillars, with the statues of Constantine, his mother Helena, Justin the younger and his wife Sophia, Justin's daughter Arabia and Justin's niece Helena inside. The *Milion* was often an important station during the Emperor's public processions (Bury 1889).

Roads connecting the *Milion* to other parts of the city had a lot of cultural importance. A colonnaded street that passed from the circular Forum of Constantine to the *Milion* and the Forum of Augusteion bore the palaces of Lausus and Antiochus and the *praetorium* of the urban prefect along its path. From the *Milion*, a road runs north meeting the acropolis and another runs southwest along the Hippodrome. The entire model follows the Curcic's ritual city model where all roads connecting to the *Milion* are flanked by important monuments on both sides (Westbrook 2013).

The famous triumphal way of Constantine has its origins in the Milion. It is so named because of its Roman counterpart, Campus Martius, where the celebration of all triumphs traditionally began. The road is 1,400 meters long and begins at the Milion, goes past the Constantine's forum, proceeds in a perfectly straight line to the street at the Theodosian arch, where it meets a gap at the valley of Aksaray, crosses a part of a colossal statue representing a river God and the piers of a monumental arch found in 1957-58 located in front of the Murad Pasa mosque built in 1471-78, goes past the pedestal of the Column of Arcadius following the straight street of Cerrahpasa Caddesi, right until the vicinity of Isakapi mescidi. The road starting from the Milion to the Theodosian Golden Gate measures 5.5 km and it took 100 years to lay down the triumphal way. Its construction ended by 435 A.D. and it remained unchanged after that (Talbot 2000).

Once the triumphal way came into existence, a lot of triumphs were actually celebrated at the Milion. When King Constantine V seized his sister's father-in-law's empire and came to power once again, the head of one of the important members of his court was hung outside the arch of the Milion for three days as a sign of victory. This was followed by horse races in the Hippodrome and public humiliation of the defeated party (McCormick 1990). Other events witnessed by this structure include several executions and the blinding of George Peganes during the rule of Michael III (Eleni 2007).

The main street at the center of Constantinople, known as the *mese*, also had its origins in the Milion. It travels through the entire city and is the main route for all traffic. It is of civic importance as it passes through all major monuments, porticoes and shopping centers. It is approximately 25 meters wide and begins at the Milion Stone, which is today located outside the Hagia Sophia, travels past the Hippodrome, the Palace of Lausos, the Palace of Antiochus, and

goes through the Forum of Constantine and the Forum of Theodosius. It passes through the Constantinian Capitolium after which it takes two paths, one path going northwest towards the Gate of Polyandri at the Theodosian walls, and the other path going southwest towards the Forum of Bovis and the Forum of Arcadius and ending at the Golden Gate where it meets the main road of Rome, known as the *Via Egnatia* (Bergstein 2010).

The Milion, and the roads connecting this structure to other cities, was also very important commercially. During Emperor Justinian's rule, a number of important shops, workshops and other commercial centers were known to line the mese running between the Milion and the Forum of Constantinople. There were about 100 such commercial places and all of them were under the control of the Church (Atkinson 2002).

Politically, important processions of Emperors passed through this structure and honoring of the Emperors by the Blues or the Whites was also done here. It also played an important role during riots, especially during the Nika riots of the 6th century and later, during conflicts of the 11th century. The structure was burned down in the fire of 1204 which took most of the city in its stride (Eleni 2007).

In conclusion, the Milion, though lost in the current age, has served as an important historical monument in terms of transport and communication in a world that lacked modern methods of mobility. Its location in the heart of the city made it an obvious choice for connectivity and passage of all important routes. It was strategically surrounded by all important monuments and churches and anybody visiting any of these places would come face-to-face with the Milion. Every part of the structure had its own meaning and all additions and deletions to the original carried remnants of the rulers' lives. All that remains of it today, however, is a stone structure, which still serves as an important tourist attraction in Istanbul.

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