



Istanbul: The Imperial City

John Freely

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Istanbul's history is a catalogue of change, not least of name, yet it has managed to retain its own unique identity. John Freely captures the flavour of daily life as well as court ceremonial and intrigue. The book also includes a comprehensive gazetteer of all major monuments and museums. An in-depth study of this legendary city through its many different ages from its earliest foundation to the present day - the perfect traveller's companion and guide.

Istanbul: The Imperial City Details

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From Reader Review Istanbul: The Imperial City for online ebook

Dave says

Objectively, this book is kind of boring. I picked this book up because I find Istanbul enchanting and I enjoyed the portions of this book that focus on the growth and development of the city and its landmarks enough to like the book as a whole. But, that really isn't the book's focus. Instead, Freely focuses on the long and violent parade of emperors and empresses that ruled the empires centered there. While these rulers' records brutality and duplicity makes the Song of Fire and Ice series look tame, a straightforward catalog of people betraying and killing family members actually grew dry.

Ionu? says

O incursiune incredibil? în istoria metropolei de pe Bosfor, a singurului ora? situat pe dou? continente, capital? a Imperiilor Bizantin ?i Otoman, al c?rei farmec continu? s? persiste...

Afifah says

Byzantium, Konstantinopel, Istanbul, nama yang sama, diciptakan sesuai penguasanya. Telah berdiri tegak sejak 658 Masehi. Membaca buku ini membuat keinginan untuk suatu saat mendatangi kota ini kian berbuncah.

Horatiu says

Nu e neap?rat o carte proast?, dar m? a?teptam la cu totul altceva din partea unei monografii a celui mai extraordinar ora?, capital? a trei imperii. Mai degrab? este o istorie a succesiunii conduc?torilor acestui Imperiu. ?i e ceva de citit, pentru c? dac? în Imperiul Bizantin, mamele î?iucid fii pentru a deveni împ?r?tese, nici în Imperiul Otoman lucrurile nu st?teau mai bine. Evlya Celebi vine ca un bonus ?i aduce un plus acestei istorii.

Mehmet Dönmez says

John Freely's reference book can be identified as "tale of three cities": Byzantium, Constantinople and ?stanbul. This lyric tale, which attracts the reader from the very first page, just starting with ethymological roots of ?stanbul "stin poli", i.e. to the city, ('no other name is needed to identify it' as Freely beautifully points out) and Anatolia which means "land of sunrise", whereas Europe can be translated as "land of darkness" in both Indo-Europe and Semitic languages according to Freely.

The tale floods from mythological origins of the city and touches every significant era until 20th century, and explains how a Greek colony evolved to first Roman capital, than land of promise for Muslim world, and a

Muslim imperial city for 5 ages than part of new Turkish republic. Yet "queen of cities" Istanbul can not be understood by just digesting its own history, hence the book dwells on city's identity in multidimensional forms; including but not limited to its topographical details, sociological layers, its interaction with other millets, i.e. national compartments and cultural evolution and transformation throughout the centuries.

The book also contains some beautiful illustrations and maps as well as containing innumerable anecdotes and reviews from famous intellectuals, such as Lord Byron and Edmondo de Amicis that I will omit in this review in order not to further spoil the book and harm its fluency.

Another aspect of the fluency is the language: I read the book from an English copy, something I mitigate to do unless I am enforced to as this decelerates me due to my lack of vocabulary and this was even more explicit in long quotations in the book. Nevertheless, reading the book in its own language acts like the soul of the work is diffusing in my brain directly and that is why I dared to write this review in English, although I knew my English is not sufficient enough.

Having said all this, the relation that you establish with the city is eventually personal: Freely's masterpiece can be a key for you to enter through one of the Roman walls and help you wander around within centuries in Istanbul; but it will be your own personal experience to associate all of these pieces with you, build your own network of memories with the people you love. This, I believe, may be why Freely implies his personal experience towards the very end of the book which contrasts the formal language dominates the rest.

Robin says

Yowzer. I thought it was hard to memorize the Presidents of the United States. It would be quite an accomplishment to memorize all of the rulers of Istanbul. I finally abandoned the book about halfway through. I am sure that it is an accurate listing of who ruled when, what architectural feats they accomplished, what major battles they fought in, whose eyes they gouged out, but it to me was a mind-numbing whirl of facts and figures, none of which were terribly interesting. More interesting to me, who just wanted to learn more about the history of Turkey, was reading about the Ottoman Empire on Wikipedia.

Mark Rossiter says

This book about Byzantium/Constantinople/Istanbul, by the American teacher John Freely, is a curious read. It purports to be a chronological history of the city, yet is in fact mostly a string of anecdotes about the doings of its sometime rulers interspersed with the odd undigested gobblet of political history. It has none of the contextual depth or atmospherics required to really understand the place, in the way, for example, that you can almost walk the streets of Victorian London in Desmond and Moore's incredible biography of Darwin. So the first 300-odd pages skate unsatisfyingly over the surface of their subject – and then the final 60-odd, footnotes to the main text, consist of detailed architectural descriptions (with sketches) of the remaining monuments of the Byzantine and Ottoman eras which would no doubt be illuminating if you were examining those places with the book in your hand, but are really just annoying when you have to flick back and forth.

Perhaps I'll pack it next time I go – it might change my mind.

Paul says

8/10

A nice overview of the city and its long history. It's thin in parts due to the length of time it covers but it's a terrific read.

Monica says

This is not a book for casual tourists, or for those who are not really, deeply interested in the history and architecture of Istanbul. With that aside, it is rich and well written, full of insights.

Sasha says

It's already a part of tradition that I always find and buy a book about the places I visit - fortunately Istanbul have not one but two excellent english bookshops in the central area (same owner) that cater for tourists, visitors and diplomats - there is a nice selection of books about Turkey and Islam in english so I selected "Istanbul - the imperial city" by John Freely as my first introduction to this beautiful and exciting city, since I don't know much about its history except basic informations.

So far I am really enjoying it - not too much space was focused on early settlers but very soon author moves on to explain it greeks and roman roots that have left much more traces than people who lived here before. Right now I am at the Chapter 12 and romans are in full swing - lots of interesting and brutal anecdotes about emperors being killed by mobs and queen mothers having their tongues sliced (!), noses cut off and such stories. We also get informations about all the important palaces, temples and public buildings built around this time as well as occasional story about ordinary people who lived there, famous courtesans, saints, priests and soldiers who were remembered in history. Very gripping story and I am truly enjoying it - and so far its still a roman city, at this stage of the book muslims are only distant treat from far away.

Neil says

Given the age of the city of Istanbul I expected more commentary on the larger themes and patterns in the city's history. Instead this book read like a laundry list of emperors and sultans. That aside, it was very informative.

Paul says

Too many facts to really digest by reading it through, but lots of information for someone visiting Istanbul

that provides a significant depth of knowledge.

I would have rated it lower if I had to read it all in one sitting--probably too overwhelming for that--but if you spread it out, you can see patterns and understand the flow of the city.

Fitria says

Dalam buku ini dipaparkan sejarah Istanbul dari kacamata kota itu sendiri, bukan dari pemikiran barat ataupun Muslim. Menarik untuk dibaca karena kita bisa mengetahui sejarah perkembangan kota itu dari zaman romawi sampai berakhirnya kekhalifahan Turki Ustmani dan awal pemerintahan negara republik yang sekuler.

Michael Scott says

I bought this book on the road back from Istanbul, a city I enjoyed very much during a week-long visit. Istanbul: The Imperial City by John Freely is exactly what I should have been reading *before* visiting: it is a history of the city sprinkled with descriptions of the buildings and landmarks still visible at the middle of the 1990s. We are also given excerpts from some of the most important writings on the topic of Istanbul, especially from the old writs.

In active, somewhat repetitive prose, Freely exposes the two and a half millenia of the wonderful city of the Golden Horn, Istanbul, or Constantinople, or Byzantium. Founded by the colonist Byzas of Megara around 660BC, Byzantium made use of advanced military engineering to protect itself for centuries from a large number of wannabe conquerors: Persians, Thracians, Scythes, Macedonians, Athenians, etc. It is early in its history the Byzantium inaugurated its infamous treasonous behavior, with switches of allegiance and murdered leaders common. For example, around 440BC Byzantium revolts against Athens, to whom it was paying tribute, and is besieged by troops from the Athenian League; the siege ends when the pro-Athenian faction lets down ladders from the besieged walls. (The Byzantine generals agreement is, today, a famous and difficult problem of consistency in distributed systems/computer science. In this problem, the goal is to agree on the order to either attack or retreat, assuming that one or several of the generals, but not all, are traitors.)

This book raised a lot of memories from my history classes. Here ... We learn about the establishment of Constantinople (in Greek Constantinopolis, or the City of Constantine), the town that effectively quadrupled the size of the ancient Byzantium while maintaining its core in the Golden Horn. We read about the long internal struggle for power of a dying Roman Empire; names like Theodosius, Julian, Justinian, and others. We see how Hagia Sophia (Aya Sofia, Hagia Sofia, the Church of the Divine Wisdom) gets built and repeatedly rebuilt. We observe the Cristian Church being split into Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox. We conquer the city with the Crusaders (the first fall) and the Ottomans (the second fall). We understand the Dark Ages and the medieval world.

Overall, I loved reading about the places I've just seen. I felt at home with many of the names, peoples, and places. I was tested thoroughly on my knowledge of history, and I was not disappointed to see what has left from my gymnasium lessons. I was delighted to observe how many words I knew from childhood were of

Greek or Turkish origin (ayazma, kestane, kadin, ...) If it wasn't for the rather long and somewhat unintelligible list of names, the rather superficial analysis of the causes of various events, and the too long excerpts in the latter parts of the book, it would have been a 5-star. Thumbs up, recommended reading for visitors of Istanbul!

Omar Taufik says

This is a book I enjoyed reading ..

With my general love of history, the author introduced me to pre Ottoman Istanbul, .. which revealed to me along with Ottoman and Republican Istanbul this what weight and value this beautiful city has in world history making me love Istanbul even more ..

The author divides the book into three parts ; Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul.

The first two cover the period before the 1453 Ottoman conquest, taking us back to around 600 bc with the early Greek settlements in the area and the establishment of Byzantium on the first hill of the historical peninsula on the Marmara/Bosphorus.

Byzantium develops into a state and then into a capital of an empire chosen by the emperor Constantine to be the Roman empire capital named Constantinople after his name.

With it's empire the capital flourishes for centuries but then finally descends witnessing internal struggles and external threats which are covered in the material recording the social development and building of the city historical monuments.

Reading this pre Ottoman history was certainly interesting and very useful with the the load of details some readers might not be familiar with in the city's ancient history.

The third part, Istanbul, was more familiar. The city Constantinople is conquered by Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror (Fatih) the year 1453 and is reborn as Istanbul the capital of the Ottoman empire inheriting the richness of the past and with the new Ottoman additions turns into a real metropolis of a city adding beauty to it's ancient historical beauty.

As in the pre Ottoman history, the city expands with numerous monuments built in the process recorded in the material along with the social developments of it's people where the author includes various texts written by historians and travellers adding value to the reading experience of the material.

The city lives with the empire and the Sultans witnessing the up and downs .. the good days and the bad days .. finally witnessing the collapse of the great Ottoman Empire ending the days of imperial Istanbul which transforms into the modern Republican Istanbul no longer a capital but still the beautiful city with it's special spirit and character surviving over it's centuries of long history on the Bosphorus.

The author added a useful appendix for readers interested in more details on the many monuments and landmarks mentioned throughout the book.

There were some very minor instances where some Ottoman political history details lacked accuracy or completion. This did not negatively impact my reading having this book a story of Istanbul the place and the inhabitants. Such minor notes will not impact my rating of the book deserving a full rating of 5/5.

A high recommendation for lovers of Istanbul and it's beauty throughout history.
