

## CONSTANTINOPLE - A PROTO TOURIST DESTINATION IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC TRADITION?

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***Abstract:** This article raises the question of whether Constantinople depicted in medieval Icelandic texts could be regarded as a proto-tourist destination, considering the love medieval Icelanders felt for exotic and distant places. The medieval Icelandic texts are fully aware of the multi-faceted nature of the city, referring to Constantinople both as a centre of secular splendour and a focus of Christianity. Among the texts dealing with Constantinople as a secular centre the emphasis is given to the *Íslendinga sögur*, sagas of Icelanders and *konunga sögur*, kings' sagas, while Constantinople's position as a centre of Christianity is the topic of many *biskupa sögur*, bishops' sagas, annals and encyclopaedic texts. All these references, both secular and religious, shed considerable light on the architectural and religious attractions displayed at Constantinople at the height of its power, revealing the fascination of medieval Icelanders with the city, their wide knowledge and their love of long-haul destinations which induced many of them from the tenth to the late twelfth century to visit this enchanting city in great numbers.*

***Keywords:** Constantinople, secular prestige, Christian relics, the imperial palace, Hagia Sophia, proto-tourist destination*

### Constantinople in Medieval Icelandic Tradition

This paper concentrates in the first place on history, literature and medieval traditions, being as such a rather peculiar contribution to this Conference on Tourism and Durable Development. Nevertheless, this choice of a topic needs defence, as this paper is based on the conviction that historical knowledge even though rooted deeply in the medieval and ancient past is a precondition for viewing the present course of events in a broader perspective. Apart from that, tourism aiming to respect culture, society and to promote sustainable development can only benefit from a written excursion into the past and for that reason I decided to focus on medieval Icelanders and their relation to Constantinople which figures prominently in medieval Icelandic tradition. Constantinople, the wealthiest and most fascinating city of the Mediterranean (Roth 1909: 10), and the center of a sophisticated culture (Lange 1959: 459-462) was throughout its history exposed to the attacks of neighboring tribes and those from further afield, including the Rus,

the Norsemen who settled in Russia in the ninth century and besieged Constantinople between 864-884, 907, 912-913 and 941 (Davidson 1976: 126-147; Blöndal-Benedikz 1978: 33-37). Even though the attacks of the Rus on Constantinople were unsuccessful, the city turned out to be a source of wealth to many of them when the emperors began to employ them in the Varangian Guard, the emperor's body-guard, established by Basil II (Davidson, 1976: 177-192; Blöndal-Benedikz 1978: 21-22; Benedikz 1969: 20-24). Another important stream of recruits for the Varangian Guard was represented by the Norsemen from Scandinavia whose fascination with Constantinople is reflected in the sagas of the Icelanders, *Íslendinga sögur*, and kings' sagas, *konunga sögur*, which all depict Constantinople as a city of opulence. The *Íslendinga sögur* mention a number of Icelanders living in the late tenth and early eleventh century who served in Constantinople in the Varangian Guard, the emphasis of such accounts being on the wealth and reputation which the ambitious Icelanders gained thereby and which they displayed later on in Iceland through their splendid weapons and colourful clothes (Hill 1993: 435-436).

In the *Íslendinga sögur* the focus is on the Icelandic heroes who sought their fortune in Constantinople at the time of the empire's greatest military victories in the tenth and the early eleventh century, when military emperors such as Nichephoros Phocas, John Tzimisce and Basil II were determined to regain the territories originally belonging to the empire (Jenkins 1981: 67-69; Runciman, 1933: 46-49; Hearsey, 1963: 127-141) and prepared to pay foreign mercenaries well for their service. The *konunga sögur*, by contrast, concentrate on the relationship between the Byzantine emperors (Blöndal-Benedikz 1978: 192-222) and the Scandinavian rulers who visited Constantinople in the first half of the twelfth century, when the prestige of the empire was still high, with the court in Constantinople retaining all its splendour under the Comneni, even though the empire had begun to experience something of a decline after its defeat at the battle of Manzikert in 1071 (Bryer 1981: 95-99; Runciman 1933: 52-54; Hearsey 1963: 148-149). Among the Scandinavian rulers mentioned as having contact with the emperors in this period are Sigurðr Jórsalafari of Norway (the early 1110s), Eiríkr Sveinsson of Denmark (the early 1100s) and Rögnvaldr Kali of Orkneys (the 1150s). This list of medieval Scandinavian kings in touch with Byzantine emperors would remain incomplete without providing references to King Haraldr Sigurðarson of Norway, who served in the Varangian Guard in the 1030s and 1040s (Davidson 1976: 211-220; Blöndal-Benedikz: 56-57; DeVries 1993: 29-33). The sagas

idealize the Scandinavian rulers<sup>1</sup> and present their visits to Constantinople as spectacular events as well as opportunities to demonstrate their self-confidence, courage and indifference to the splendor of the Byzantine court, the qualities which bring them the admiration of the emperors who, as a result, treat them as their equals.

To sum up, the accounts of Byzantine greatness present both in *Íslendinga sögur* and *konunga sögur* contain a grain of truth. The empire had indeed experienced a period of greatness at the time when several Icelanders served in the Varangian Guard in the 10/11<sup>th</sup> century and in the twelfth century when, visited by various Scandinavian rulers, the Byzantine court still surpassed all other European courts in terms of wealth and splendour. Nevertheless, in spite of their emphasis on real historical events, both *Íslendinga sögur* and *konunga sögur* create the out-of-date and highly idealized image of Constantinople which was no longer reliable in the thirteenth century when the extant manuscripts of both types of sagas were produced. In other words, both *Íslendinga sögur* and *konunga sögur* describe the world of splendour and prestige which no longer existed in the thirteenth century, and this gap between

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the tales connected with Haraldr's service in the Varangian Guard, which create an idealised picture of this difficult and domineering character, see Davidson, *The Viking Road*, pp. 215-218. Many of the military tricks attributed to Haraldr in order to glorify his ingenuity are, in reality, a part of a long historical tradition which depicted famous Normans as individuals of exceptional mental astuteness (de Vries 1931: 66-69). For a discussion of Haraldr's conflict with the imperial authority in Constantinople, see again Davidson, *The Viking Road*, p. 209, p. 211; Blöndal-Benedikz, *The Varangians*, pp. 88-89, p. 93; Blöndal, 'The Last Exploit', 1-26. For a fictional account of his dealings and conflicts with Byzantine emperors, see *Heimskringla* (c. 1220-1235), *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, ed. Aðalbjarnarson, p. 85, p. 88; *Morkinskinna* (c. 1217-1222), ed. Jónsson, p. 80, p. 82; and *Fagrskinna* (after 1220), ed. Einarsson, pp. 234-235.

Another king, Sigurðr Jórsalafari, is also seen in *konunga sögur* as an idealised figure, and his meeting with the emperor Alexius I is presented as a kind of competition between the two rulers in terms of prestige: *Heimskringla*, *Magnússona saga*, ed. Aðalbjarnarson, p. 253; *Fagrskinna*, ed. Einarsson, p. 319; *Morkinskinna*, ed. Jónsson, p. 351. For a further discussion of Sigurðr's stay in Constantinople, see Kalinke, 'Sigurðar Saga Jórsalafara', pp. 158-159; Hill, 'Pilgrimage and Prestige', pp. 442-443; de Vries, 'Normanisches Lehngut', p. 72. Sigurðr's gift of ships to the Byzantine emperor, Alexius I, which is lauded in the sagas as an act of generosity, was in reality a successful business transaction on the part of Sigurðr who sold his ships easily at a high price to Alexius who desperately needed each boat to reorganise the Byzantine navy (Blöndal-Benedikz 1978: 136-140).

The portrayal of the Danish king Eiríkr as a generous ruler who in order to repay Alexius' hospitality allows many of Danish soldiers to stay in Alexius' service is also an idealised version of the events. In reality the Danish king parted with his soldiers for a high financial compensation (Blöndal-Benedikz 1978: 131-136).

the Byzantine splendid past and its miserable contemporary situation added to these texts a strong fictitious dimension. In the thirteenth century, Constantinople had indeed suffered a series of disasters from which it never recovered. In 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, the city was sacked and robbed of most of its treasures and relics, numerous manuscripts and works of art being lost or destroyed. The crusaders conquered the greatest part of the Byzantine Empire, which after the death of Manuel I. Comnenus (1144-1180) had already lost most of its territories (Serbia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Cilicia) and was by 1204 reduced to Greece and the coastal part of Asia Minor. The crusaders founded the Latin empire with Constantinople as its capital, but neither the new empire nor the city flourished in new circumstances. In 1261 when Constantinople was regained by Michael VIII Palaeologus it was mostly depopulated and the suburbs burnt in 1204 were not rebuilt because of the poverty experienced in the decades of the Latin Empire (Runciman 1933: 56-60; Talbot, 1993: 243-261). Constantinople was a heavy financial burden and in order to maintain the court splendour Michael's successors allowed the fleet to decay on the pretext that its upkeep was a needless expense and too great a burden on the treasury. Fortresses and armaments were also pared away and army estimates were reduced by Michael's successor Andronicus II (Nicol 1993: 108). In this way the government managed to save some money for the upkeep of the court, but the poverty could not be concealed for long (Diehl, 1957: 196-199).

Various medieval Icelandic sources of clerical origin suggest that medieval Icelanders must have been aware of the weakness of Constantinople in the thirteenth century. Thus in one of its chapters, the *Þorláks saga Helga*, *The saga of St Thorlac* (in *Biskupa sögur*, vol. 1, eds. J. Sigurðsson and G. Vigfússon, pp. 363-364) mentions a group of Icelandic Varangians who resided in Constantinople at the time when the city was – as the saga makes it very clear – under the command of western rulers: '... Eigi miklu síðar, en upp kom helgi hins sæla Þorláks biskups, var Philippus af Flæmingjalandi valdr til konungs í Miklagarði...'. (Translation: Not long after the sanctification of the blessed bishop Thorlac, Phillip of Flanders was chosen to be king in Constantinople). This is a mistake, the first Latin emperor was Baldwin I of Flanders (1204–1205) who was succeeded on the throne by his younger brother Henry (1205–1216), but the Icelandic remark nevertheless implies the Icelandic awareness of a power shift in Constantinople in the first decade of the thirteenth century. Thorlak (1133-1193) was declared a saint by the allthing in 1198 (Blöndal-Benedikz 1978: 168–170). The Annals provide additional evidence that things were going badly for the Greeks by commenting on the Greeks'

arrival at the Council of Lyon in 1274 in order to negotiate for the religious union with the West, their main aim being the frustration of the projected western invasion of the reestablished Greek empire.<sup>2</sup> *De corona spinea* records that some of the thorns from the Crown of Thorns, originally kept in Constantinople (*Alfræði íslenzk*, ed. Kálund; 1908: 25-26; *Hauksbók*, eds. Jónsson and Jónsson, 1892-96: 177) were donated to the Norwegian king Magnús Hákonarson (1263-1280) by the French king Phillip III (Storm 1880: 161-162),<sup>3</sup> who inherited it from his father Louis the Saint, who in turn had bought this most prestigious Christian relic from the impoverished Latin emperor residing in Constantinople (Hearsay 1963: 204-208). Apart from the Crown of Thorns, the impoverished Latin emperors were forced to part with many other famous relics (Barta, <http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n56part5.pdf>), pp. 1-5; Klein 2006: 77-79; Robbert 1995: 43-58). It is unlikely, however, that the knowledge of the declining fortunes of the Byzantine Empire was restricted to the clergy alone, especially as the declining numbers of Icelanders serving in the Varangian Guard in the thirteenth century imply the awareness of Icelandic laymen that the Byzantine Empire was no more a fast route to enrichment. By contrast with what is depicted in the *Íslendinga sögur* referring to the 10/11<sup>th</sup> century situation, military service in the impoverished Constantinople of the thirteenth century was no longer a source of wealth and pride, the Icelanders' connections with the city after the end of its golden age became obscure and it was very unlikely that the Norsemen still served in the army of the thirteenth-century Greek emperors, being replaced in this capacity by the English and Scots (Blöndal-Benedikz 1978: 170).

In the fourteenth century the political and material situation of the empire further deteriorated, the poverty of the Byzantine emperors reaching the most pathetic proportions: vessels of earthenware and pewter on the imperial table, clothes and crowns adorned with coloured glass instead of gems (Diehl 1957: 197-198), the arrest of John V for debt in Venice (Diehl 1957: 199; Nicol 1993: 272-273), badly illuminated Hagia Sophia as there was not enough money to buy candles and oil for lamps, the loveliest parts of Constantinople lying in ruins, greatly diminished in population, and the sale of Thessaloniki to

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<sup>2</sup> The *Konungsannáll*, p. 56, and *Lögmannsannáll*, p. 93, in *Annállar og nafnaskrá*, ed. Jónsson. The Greeks' willingness to consent to the religious union in Lyon in 1274 is recorded also in *Laurentius saga Hólarbiskups*, p. 792, and *Árna biskups saga Þorlákssonar*, p. 691, in *Biskupa sögur*, eds. Sigurðsson and Vigfússon.

<sup>3</sup> The information about the Crown of Thorns owned by Phillip III and his gift to King Magnus of Norway is also found in *Laurentius saga Hólarbiskups*, p. 792, in *Biskupa sögur*, eds. Sigurðsson and Vigfússon.

Venetians in 1423 for 50000 ducats (Diehl 1957: 199). The Byzantine emperors found themselves in a desperate and humiliating position, as they had to seek military and financial assistance from the Western (Catholic) powers who had sacked Constantinople in 1204. They were prepared even for a religious union with the Catholic Church (Ostrogorski 1961: 499-500; Walter 1962: 188-189) which, however, was never realized because of the strong resentment felt by the majority of Greeks. It is necessary to point out that in the fourteenth and fifteenth century there existed a literary genre, the Icelandic *riddara sögur*, Icelandic derivatives of medieval romance, which still insisted on depicting Constantinople as a city of fabulous wealth. In medieval Icelandic romances written in the fourteenth century historical reliability, which is found to some extent in the *Íslendinga sögur* and *konunga sögur*, is finally lost. The exaggerated accounts of the city's splendour and the image of Byzantine emperors as being superior over all other rulers make the Icelandic medieval romances, Icelandic *riddara sögur*, even more significantly out of touch with the contemporary fourteenth and fifteenth-century reality which presented the last stage of the empire's decline. In medieval romances, however, there is no sign of the Greeks' struggles, poverty and humiliation, and Constantinople with its unsurpassed beauty is a desirable destination to many of the heroes of Icelandic *riddarasögur* (Schlauch 1934: 67-68).

### **The Imperial Palace**

The first part of the article has focused on the history of Constantinople from the tenth to the fifteenth century, concentrating on the sagas of the Icelanders, kings' sagas, bishops' sagas and annals, while it mentioned Icelandic romances only in passing. The survey has revealed two rather different perspectives on Constantinople existing in these texts. The sagas of the Icelanders and kings' sagas referring to the situation in Constantinople in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries see the city as a source of exceptional wealth and prestige, while the bishops' sagas and annals reveal their awareness of the decline which befell the city and the empire in the thirteenth century. The second part of the article concentrates on another set of written evidence connected with Constantinople: historiography and encyclopaedic literature which discuss the city's position as a cult centre for the relics of Christ's Passion and a missionary centre for Eastern Europe and the translated romance *Karlamagnús saga* and the Icelandic romance *Kirialax saga* from the fourteenth century which, even though providing fictitious accounts, both concentrate on the imperial palace.

The Great Palace of Constantinople, also known as the Sacred Palace, served as the main royal residence of Byzantine emperors from 330 to 1081 when Alexius I chose as his residence the palace of Blachernae. In spite of that, the Great Palace continued to be used as the primary administrative and ceremonial centre. The Latin emperors also used it as their residence but as they lacked the money for its maintenance they let it fall into disrepair and after 1261 it was largely abandoned, the Blachernae being used instead, and by the time Constantinople was conquered by the Turks in 1453, the palace was completely abandoned. In the heydays of Constantinople, however, the imperial palace was the most imposing building in the city, with clearly defined secular as well as religious functions. On one hand it demonstrated its material and political superiority over the Christian world, but on the other hand it had strong religious connotations. The secular connotations are relatively easy to understand: the palace was a visible manifestation of the glory of the empire, being the most important architectural achievement within the urban setting of the city (Carile 2005: 84), located close to the Hippodrome where the emperor was visible to the public, communicating with it through the representatives of the circus factions. In other words, the Hippodrome presented a visible and accessible aspect of imperial power in touch with the city's populace. The imperial palace, by contrast, symbolised an elevated, remote and secretive aspect of the imperial power, being a carefully confined and guarded complex accessible to a very select group of dignitaries and foreign ambassadors. The palace in which the emperor followed a strict and elaborated ceremonial therefore remained inaccessible to the city's populace at least until the Fourth Crusade in 1204 (Featherstone 2006: 49; Devereaux 2012: 10) and the same restriction applied to the majority of foreigners visiting the city before 1204. The idea that imperial palaces have to be so huge, magnificent, majestic and marvellous that it would be impossible to describe them gained exceptional strength in late antiquity when the concept of awe-inspiring and divine nature of the imperial power reached new proportions under the emperor Diocletianus. He remodelled the court protocol in such a way as to resemble as closely as possible the rituals practised in eastern monarchies in order to emphasise the divine nature of emperors. This mentality is also reflected in the architecture of numerous palaces Diocletianus built in various parts of the empire and whose appeal was so strong that they provided an architectural and ideological model for all the imperial palaces from late antiquity to the Carolingian period (Bužančić 2011: 4-5). Imperial palaces continued to be built after Diocletianus' death as well and it is not surprising that the

Byzantine emperors devoted so much attention to their palace in Constantinople, being fully aware of political and ideological implications of such a building.

On the other hand, the palace had strong religious connotations. According to the ideology fostered in late antiquity, the imperial palace imitated the image of the heavenly kingdom, the heavenly Jerusalem. Even though there are no preserved written records which would describe the imperial palace with precision, their emphasis on the bright walls, precious stones, gold, marbles, mosaics and bright light implies the main objective of the palace: to create a heavenly vision of light (Carile 2005: 99-100). Just as the imperial palace was an embodiment of the heavenly palace, so the emperor was the minister of God and his representative on earth. This prestigious position of Byzantine emperors was further reinforced by the fact that the churches within the imperial palace served as repositories of the relics of Christ's Passion, which changed the imperial palace into the sacred place and elevated the emperor to the position of a divinely appointed guardian and protector of the most sacred relics in Christendom (Klein 2006: 80; Kalavrezou 1997: 3-54) and which enhanced his prestige in relation to all other Christian rulers to an unprecedented degree. It is therefore understandable why other Christian rulers often felt uneasy, frustrated and envious in relation to Byzantine emperors, for example Charlemagne, who was the first western ruler to challenge the supremacy of Byzantine emperors (Polak 1982: 163, 167-168; Adler 1947: 550-561) and this feeling of unease as well as an ill concealed inferiority complex reemerged with renewed energy in the period of crusades, under the Comnenian dynasty (1081-1185).

The *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, medieval French *chanson de geste* from the twelfth century, which was translated into Old Norse as *Jórsalaferð* (The Travel to Jerusalem), convincingly reflects the bad feelings between the Byzantine emperors and western rulers, by creating an account of the imaginary encounter between the fictitious Byzantine emperor Hugon and Charlemagne in which the latter demonstrates his superiority over Hugon.<sup>4</sup> After his return from Jerusalem, Charlemagne visits Constantinople where he is entertained in a friendly fashion by the emperor Hugon. Charlemagne and his paladins are particularly enchanted

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<sup>4</sup> For the influence of Hugon's palace in the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* on the palaces mentioned in Icelandic romances, see Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 157-164. The palace has been also discussed by a number of scholars working in the field of comparative literature, drawing parallels in particular with the marvellous buildings in Irish literature (Loomis 1927/28: 337-345; Cross 1927/28: 349-354, Schlauch 1932: 512-513).

by the imperial palace, but they are less amused by its rotation which terrifies them beyond measure, while the emperor maliciously takes delight in their troubles. The imperial court was famous for its automata, singing birds, roaring lions and the imperial throne raised into the air together with the emperor, many of these automata being mentioned in the *De Ceremoniis* by Constantinus Porfirogenitus (Brett 1954: 477-487). Both the unsophisticated neighbouring tribes and sophisticated Westerners, such as Liutprand of Cremona, were fascinated and intimidated at the same time by the sight of the automata. Charlemagne and his paladins, however, feel resentful at the Byzantine attempts to intimidate and mock them. They in turn retaliate by taking all kinds of silly vows which serve to mock the emperor, and when forced by their offended host to fulfill their exaggerated vows they succeed with divine assistance so that Hugon has to admit the superiority of Charlemagne. The account in *Jórsalaferð* runs as follows:

Sú höll var harðla væn, er Húgon konungur átti. Ræfrið var allt skrifað með ýmsum sögum. Sú höll var kringlótt og einn stólpi í miðju, er hún stóð öll á, en um þann stólpa voru hundrað annarra stólpa, allir gylltir, en á hverjum þeirra var barns líki gert af eiri, og hver líkneskjan hafði Olifanthorn í munni sér, og var hver líkneskja gyllt. Þeir stólpar voru allir holir innan, og blés vindur undir höllina neðan, svo að upp kom í stólpana, og var með svo miklum brögðum um búid, að börnin öll blésu með þeim vindi á hvers konar lund, er fagurt var, en hvert þeirra rétti fingur að öðru hlæjandi beint sem kvik væri. En Karlamagnús konungur undraðist og sannaði þá það, er kona hans hafði sagt. Þá kom vindur hvass og sneri höllini, sem mylna ylti. Þá blésu börnin, og hló hvert að öðru, en þeim þótti fagurt til að heyra, sem engla söngur væri. Öll glyggin voru af crystallo, en þó að hið versta veður úti, var þó í henni sigott (ed. Vilhjálmsson 1950: 748).

King Hugon's hall was extremely beautiful. The roof was painted, depicting various stories. The hall itself was circular, with a pillar standing right in the middle, and around that pillar were a hundred others, all gilded; on each there was an image of a child, made of brass, and each image had an olifant horn in its mouth. All the pillars were hollow, and the wind blew under the hall in such a way that it came up into the pillars so that the children blew, with the wind, in various pleasant ways, each of them extending a finger to the others, laughing as if they were alive. King Karlamagnus marvelled greatly at this and agreed, then, with what his wife had said. Just then, there came a sharp wind from the sea which turned the hall like a revolving mill, and the children blew, laughing at each other; to those who were within the hall it seemed as lovely to hear as the song of angels. The windows were all of crystal so that even when the weather was of the worst kind outside it was always still most pleasant in the hall (tr. Heatt 1980: 189-190).

The *Kirialax saga* also provides the description of the imperial palace, with the account running as follows:

I midri hó llinne var giort eitt past kringlótt með frabærum meistara domi. Þat var allt gert með gulligum pilarum ok voru þeir XII, ok i millum hverra pilára voru XII sæti giorr með filsbæini grafín oll með likneskium dýra ok fugla, q ll skinande með gull, enn á hverium pilar stód likneskia sem einar iungfrur ok hafði sér i munni fagra pipu blásandi þar í; vindrinn lá af sjónum undir loptum þeim, sem yfir vóru gQ r, svá at vindr mátti blása með hafgolu neðan i pilárana, sungu þá pipurnar með hinum fegrstum rQ ddum (ed. Kålund 1917: 87).

In the centre oft he hall there was a round daís construted by masters of amazing skill. It was decorated with golden pillars and they were twelve, and among those pillars there were twelve seats made of ivory and on them were engraved the images of animals and birds, all shining with gold. On each pillar stood a statue of a young woman, and she held in her mouth a fair pipe and was blowing into it. The wind lay out of sight under these balconies [which were built] above so that the wind together with sea-breeze could blow from beneath up into the pillars and then the pipes resounded with the most plesant sounds (tr. Divjak 2009: 344-345).

The tone of the account is earnest and dignified. There is a strong emphasis on the palace's artistic perfection, which is manifest in golden pillars, ivory chairs, the statues of twelve maidens and harmonious sounds created by the pipes held by the maidens. The palace does not rotate, thus losing its intimidating and weird character. Instead of the laughing children, as in the *Jórsalaferð*, whose behavior at the rotation of the palace additionally underlines the bizarre and rather malicious nature of the place, the *Kirialax saga* refers to twelve statues of maidens standing on golden pillars and chairs made of ivory and decorated with carved images of birds and animals. This description of the palace as a place of beauty and splendour as well as the absence of all elements of surprise, mockery and shock suggest that the *Kirialax saga*, unlike the *Jórsalaferð*, did not try to mock Byzantine emperors, being by contrast deeply impressed by the imperial majety of Byzantine kings.

### **Religious Connotations**

Constantine I (306-337), the first Roman emperor who publicly showed his adherence to Christianity, changed Byzantium into his capital, renaming it Constantinople. Although not all of its inhabitants were Christians, the majority was, and in the early fourth century, the age in which only 10% of the population in the empire was Christians, it was the only city in the Roman Empire in which Christian places of worship outnumbered the pagan temples (Stevens 1981: 8). Constantine's successors, adherents to the new religion, continued to live in the new capital which was also called New Rome and was meant to be a Christian alternative to pagan Rome (Johnson 1963: 36-37). The

name New Rome indicates that the new capital preserved many features of Old Rome, Constantinople being at first a Latin speaking city, and it was only in the seventh century under the emperor Heraclius that Greek prevailed even in law and at court (Ostrogorsky 1941/63: 237-238).

Medieval Icelandic tradition preserved a body of texts referring to Constantinople as a city with an exceptional religious appeal. *Veraldar saga*, The history of the world (Benediktsson 1944: 58-60) and *Sylvesters saga*, The saga of the pope Silvester, (ed. Unger 1877: 277-278) reveal that the medieval Icelanders knew a well-known legend that Constantine was healed from leprosy by Pope Sylvester, became a convert and settled in Constantinople. They were also aware of the tradition that St. Helena, Constantine's mother, was buried in this city and regarded as the finder of the Cross, as indicated by *Veraldar saga* (ed. Benediktsson 1944: 60, 64). Constantinople is also referred to as an influential missionary center which had a strong and permanent political, religious and cultural influence on the Southern and Eastern Slavs. The missionary activities of Greeks in Russia in the tenth century, encouraged by the conversion of Grand Duke Vladimir in 989, were well known in medieval Icelandic tradition. Thus *Kristni saga*, The book of Christianity (ed. Kahle 1905: 43) and *Þáttur Þorvalds ens víðförla*, The short story of Thorvald the Far-traveller (Kahle 1905: 78) record that Þorvaldr, an eager Christian convert, went to Russia as a missionary and ended his life there. However, before his departure for Russia he visited Constantinople where he was friendly entertained by the emperor and his clergy, the event which helped him to recover from his missionary failure in his native land which he tried to convert to Christianity some years before the country's official adoption of Christianity in 1000.

*Veraldar saga* also mentions Hagia Sophia, its construction being mentioned together with two other achievements of Justinian I, his victory over the Vandals and the Goths and his great collection of laws, the Codex Justinianus. In *Veraldar saga* the church is described as follows: 'Jvstinianus let gera i Miklagardi gyþs mvstari þat er a Girka tvngv heitir Agia Sophia en ver kollum Egisif ok er þat hvs bezt gert ok mest i ollum heim i sva at ver vitim.' (ed. Benediktsson 1944: 65). Translation: Justinian ordered to erect in Constantinople the temple of God which is called in Greek Agia Sophia and which we call Egisif and this is the house most carefully made and the biggest in the entire world as far as we know. A brief reference to Hagia Sophia is found also in *Alfræði íslenzk*, ed. Kålund, vol. I (Hoc dicit Iohannes apostolus de Paradiso), p. 10: 'I Miklagardi er kirkia su, er aa þeira lydsku heitir Agiosophia ok Nordmenn kalla Egisif. Su er kirkia dyrliguz ok itarliguz allra kirkna i heimnum ath gerd ok vegsti.' Translation: In

Constantinople is the church which is in their language called Agiasophia and the Norsemen call it Egisif. This church is the most magnificent and famous of all churches in the world both in shape and size. Finally, the Icelanders knew that Hagia Sophia also served as the repository for the most prestigious Christian relic and the very symbol of Christianity, the True Cross, as confirmed by two encyclopaedias from the fourteenth century:

*Hauksbók* and *Alfræði islensk* deserve our particular notice as they both encompass a list of relics kept in Constantinople and which were in this paper briefly mentioned as those items which raised Byzantine emperors above all other rulers of Christendom. Both encyclopaedias date from the fourteenth century but both lists of relics might have been composed as early as the twelfth century. This century witnessed an increase in western visits to Constantinople, this flow of travellers being encouraged by the establishment of the crusader states in Syria, marriage alliances and diplomatic missions. At the same time the city was frequented by merchants, scholars, artists and pilgrims (Devereaux 2012: 10), and a considerable number of descriptions of the relics and their sanctuaries emerged as a result (Devereaux 2012: 11). As the Icelanders were known to have made pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem in this century, these two lists suggest that Constantinople might have been on the agenda of some Icelandic pilgrims at least who would have been tempted by the city's reputation as the repository of the most sacred Christian relics. In order to get a better insight into the relics kept in Constantinople, it is necessary to concentrate on the *Alfræði islensk*, providing both the original and the translation.

...I Mikla-gardi [er?] kirkia er heitir Ægisif, i þeiri kirkiu er cross drottins, sa er Elena drottning hafdi þangat. I borg þeiri hvila þeir Phillipus ok Iacobus, Luc[a]s ok Timoth[eus] ok en hegri hond sancti Stephani, kyrtill drottins vars, höfut Iohannis baptiste ok höfut AbraHams, Isaaacs, Iacobs, eta su er drottinn var i lagidr. ... I Miklagardi i pollutum enum fornum er rit þat, er drottinn vár reit sealfir sinum höndum, spiot ok naglar, þorngerð, mauttull, svipa, kër, kyrtill, skonudr, steinn er undir höfði drottins var i leidi, ok likblëior med sveita-duk ok blodi Christz, munlaug su er hann þo i fëtr postola sinna, ok dukur sa er hann þerði medr, gyrdill sancte Marie med staf hennar, hofut Iohannis b[aptiste ok ar]mlegr med hendi, vöndr Moysi, kofl [hins] hel[ga Elias propheta, armlegr] sancti Andree apostoli ok hönd [sancti Pauli apostoli?], hö[fit] Luce ewangeliste, höfut Theodori martiris, höfut [Thom]e apostoli med fingri hans, hofut \*Gregorie erchibyskups ens mikla Ermlandz, hár \*Gregorie Nazianzeni, klëdi

Demetri martiris, stoll Davids konungs, beisl Constantini konungs, blod Pantaleonis martiris med miolk er or sarino rann, er hann var högvinn, af hondum sancti Petri nockur hlutr, silfr-kros iafn-langr likama Christz, eirblastar-horn III þau er Iosue lét þiota VII daga fyrr [e]nn felli borg[i]n Hiericho, steinn sa er la yfer brunni, þa er drottinn mællti vid samverska konu, silfr-kros gylldr med [g]im-steinum. Þann kros lét Constantinus konungr gera i liking þess kross, er hann sa i himni, likneski sancte Marie med Iesu Christo syni hennar, þat liknesk[i] stack nockur gydingr med knifi i barkann ok ran[n] or blod. Þar hvilir ok Iacobr brodir drottins ok Simeon, er bar Christ til alltiris med fornum, Zacarias fader Iohannis baptiste, ok XII vanhlaupar er postolar baru, aux Noa er hann smidadi med örkina, hófut Mathie apostoli. Þar hvilir Constantinus konungr hinn micli ok Helena modir hans ok margir adrir keisarar. I Micla-gardi ero reifar þær er Christus var vafidr i, ok gull þat er enir fiolkyngu fërdu, ok marg[sky]ns heilagr domr annar...

(...In Constantinople is the church called *Ægisif* [Hagija Sofia], in this church there is the Cross of the Lord brought there by the queen Helena. In this city rest Phillip, Jacob, Luke and Timothy and the right arm of St Stephen, the tunic of Our Lord, the head of John the Baptist and the heads of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the manger in which Our Lord was laid... In Constantinople, in an old palace there is the writing written by Our Lord with his own hand, the lance and nails, the crown of thorns, the pillow stone which lay under the head of Our Lord in the tomb and the shroud with the sudarium and the blood of Christ, the basin in which he washed the feet of his apostles and the towel with which he dried them, the girdle of Holy Mary together with her stick, the head and forearm of John the Baptist, the stick of Moyses, the sheepskin of the prophet Elias, the forearm of St Andrew and the arm of St Paul the Apostle, the head of the Luke the Evangelist, the head of the martyr Theodore, the head of the apostle Thomas together with his fingers, the head of the archbishop Gregory from Greater Armenia, the hair of Gregory of Nazianzus, the clothes of the marty Demetrius, the throne of King David, the bridle of King Constantine, the blood of the martyr Pantaleon with milk flowing from his wounds when he was killed, some fragments of the arm of St Peter, the silver cross with the life-size image of Christ, three trumpets of brass into which Joshua commanded to blow for seven days until the fall of the town of Jericho, the stone lying above the well where Christ conversed with a Samaritan woman, the silver cross decorated with precious stones. This cross was made at the command of King Constantine modelled on the cross he saw in heaven, the image of Holy Mary with Jesus Christ, her son, this image was stabbed into the

neck by a Jew and the blood flowed from it. There rest Jacob, the brother of the Lord, and Simeon who carried Christ to the altar with the sacrificial gift, Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, and twelve baskets made of reeds, carried by the apostles, the axe with which Noah carved out the ark, the head of the apostle Mathias. There rest King Constantine the Great, his mother Helena and many other emperors. In Constantinople are the swaddling bands in which Christ was wrapped, and gold fetched by the magi and many other sacred relics...

Lists of relics similar to that incorporated in the *Alfræði íslenzk* appear in many medieval European texts, eastern and western, for example in the *Anonymous of Terragonensis* 55, the end of the eleventh century, *Descriptio sanctuari Constantinopolitani*, the *Mercati Anonymous*, and many others (Bacci 2003: 243). The *Anonymous Mercati* which is preserved in two manuscripts, the first one from the early twelfth and the second one from the early thirteenth century is believed to have been written by an English monk from the beginning of the twelfth century and might have served as a source for the list of Constantinople's relics in the *Alfræði íslenzk* (Simek, 1990: 287-292). This list of relics as well as that found in *Hauksbók* further confirm the integration of medieval Icelanders into the European world sharing with it its intellectual and political concerns which encouraged the European West to establish and maintain connections with Constantinople, the object of their greatest envy and admiration.

## Conclusion

This survey of medieval Icelandic texts reveals the fascination of medieval Icelanders with Constantinople and their awareness of the city's position as a centre of wealth and imperial power as well as the repository of the most sacred relics of Christendom until 1204. In the thirteenth century, however, they witnessed the declining fortunes of the Byzantine Empire and its capital city, as reflected in the accounts referring to the thirteenth-century events. Their knowledge of the Byzantine empire and its capital city was to a considerable degree based on first-hand evidence, as many Icelanders served in the Varangian Guard and many Scandinavian kings stopped in Constantinople on their way to the Holy Land, all these actions being preserved in medieval Icelandic tradition which in turn produced a sizeable body of texts referring to Constantinople.

Ambitious Norsemen serving in the Varangian Guard and the warlike Scandinavian kings, who stopped in Constantinople on their way to the Holy Land, could hardly be denoted as proto-tourists. The primary objective of the Varangians was to make money and the primary

objective of the Scandinavian kings was to pay a diplomatic visit to the emperors and their transactions with the Byzantine emperors concerning the sale of ships and the emperors' recruitment of Norse warriors for a decent financial compensation could hardly be regarded as business tourism. Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that the Varangians and the kings alike were not touched by the beauty of the city, that they did not visit its famous shrines and churches and that their horizons were not broadened as a result, which is after all one of the main objectives of tourism. The lists of relics preserved in medieval Icelandic tradition imply the pilgrimages to Constantinople, but the preserved evidence is so meagre that at present it would be too premature to infer that there existed any form of proto-pilgrimage tourism. The answer to the question raised in the title of this paper is therefore negative. All the travels surveyed in this paper were undertaken for much more mundane reasons, curiosity, pleasure, relaxation, and entertainment being assigned a secondary or tertiary role at most. Nevertheless, this study of the travels and visits to Constantinople, both historical and fictitious, was worth the effort as the paper examines secular and religious attractions of the city which enabled it to retain its superiority over other Christian cities for centuries and changed it, conditionally speaking, into one of the most fascinating destinations. On the basis of all this evidence it can be argued that even though Constantinople does not figure as a tourist destination, it deserves to be studied from this perspective together with many other ancient and medieval cities which attracted crowds of visitors of all kinds. Apart from studying routes and itineraries, it would be advisable to concentrate on the conditions in which travels and pilgrimages were conducted, paying attention to transport, accommodation, nutrition, legal details, the cost of travel, the financing of such undertakings and other similar issues, which could serve as research topics in the field of tourism and management, which would enable both the lecturers and students to view their chosen field from a broader historical and social perspective.

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