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Title: CA4 Creative Work: Travelogue of Venetian Merchant in Constantinople

My grandfather used to tell me stories about his many adventures in Byzantium. He was a scholar who frequented Constantinople in pursuit of knowledge. He vividly narrated the city’s fall to the Ottomans, explaining why we have so many scholars here in Venice. Thanks to his connections in the academic world, I received a good education in Greek and Arithmetic.

Today, I am a merchant of the Republic of Venice. The war against the Ottomans has recently ended and trade is starting to pick up. And so for the first time in 1482, my carrack set out for Constantinople.

As the ship approached the city harbour, I began to recognise some of the old fortifications such as the Theodosian and Constantinian Walls. Indeed, what my grandfather told me about the walls was true. They were so advanced and huge, rising over 30 piedi in height. Along with the innovative harbour chain, the city was thought to be impenetrable. Raiders and invaders of the past simply stood no chance at scaling and overcoming the formidable defences. Everyone truly felt safe from the outside world.

However, we now live in a world of serpentine powder machines that can decimate any stone structure. Impregnable cities are now rendered vulnerable. Weapons of mass destruction can now kill dozens in a single blow. A horrifying thought indeed.

Moving on, the biggest highlight of the trip is undoubtedly the Covered Bazaar. It was an endless labyrinth, a sturdy market featuring authentic Ottoman architectural principles. Within and surrounding the bazaar, countless shops sell clothes, jewels, spices, and more silk than you’d ever find back home. Merchants from far and wide traded at the market, a vibrant and colourful place indeed.

However, the thing that stood out most to me was the guild system implemented by the bazaar. Under such a system, guilds, among other things, impose quality standards on the wares sold, ensuring that we don’t trade defective or fake goods. A brilliant solution to prevent scams.

Many of the more successful guilds were Islam-based, with a few restrictions placed on outsiders like me. At first, it felt unfair that my trade options were limited. However, the more I learned, the more I understood that their holy book already has a set of guidelines for conducting trade. In addition, I noticed that many of them leave their goods unattended when attending prayer. In all honesty, I don’t even have that level of trust with merchants back home.

While we’re on the subject of Islam, the great church of Saint Sophia has expectedly been converted into a mosque. Although I am not a very religious person myself, I was shocked to hear about the “enslavement” of Constantinople. About how the city would fall because the Holy Spirit had abandoned it. Contrarily, I don’t see any of that happening here. In fact, the streets are far more lively as compared to my grandfather’s description of them. It does not look like a city doomed to collapse.

The place of worship was once the pride and joy of Eastern Orthodoxy. But minarets now surround the former basilica, with names of important Islamic figures decorating its interior. These new rulers are truly making their mark on the city.  
 Nonetheless, the restrictions on non-Muslims aren’t that bad. Despite the tensions between us and the Ottomans, we are still allowed to practise our religions. Our well-being is taken care of as well. It is indeed a place worth visiting. I might even listen to the advice of the other merchants and settle down here for a while.

Title: CA4 Accompanying Essay for the Travelogue

The travelogue is about the adventures of a young Venetian merchant in Constantinople, a few years after the first Ottoman-Venetian war ended. Using concepts learned from the module, I took this opportunity to shed light upon possible explanations for the city’s attractiveness and success. Specifically, I hoped to relay the reasons behind Constantinople’s rise to economic fame, as well as its sacred significance to the Christian and the Islamic world.

Firstly, I did my best to refine some of the period-specific terminology used in the travelogue. For example, terms such as “metre” and “gunpowder” would not have been invented yet; instead, they were “piedi”[[1]](#footnote-0) and “serpentine powder”[[2]](#footnote-1). In addition, the Venetian Carrack was the most likely merchant vessel used in the story. Mathematics, on the other hand, was often split into Geometry and Arithmetic[[3]](#footnote-2) in medieval times. Lastly, the Grand Bazaar and Hagia Sophia would have been called differently by a 15th Century Venetian.

Secondly, I highlighted Constantinople’s role as a city of power, which was communicated through the city’s monuments and buildings,[[4]](#footnote-3) both before and during Ottoman rule. In terms of military power, I emphasised the city’s formidable defence and its vulnerability. Drawing inspiration from the module’s reading material,[[5]](#footnote-4) I brought up how the walls of Constantinople were very advanced and elaborate for the time; no pre-Ottoman medieval invader was able to besiege it.[[6]](#footnote-5) Subsequently, I elaborated on the Golden Horn defence, an effective layer of protection against naval invaders.[[7]](#footnote-6) Indeed, it was one of the greatest city fortifications at the time, which was why everyone felt safe in the city. The fall of Constantinople, however, turned out to be a critical moment in European history.[[8]](#footnote-7) It marked the end of the Middle Ages and the demise of city wall defences. I hoped to capture the immense fear that people at the time were likely feeling; no place was truly safe against this new destructive technology.

Furthermore, Constantinople was also a place of great sacred power. Firstly, I noted how important the city was to the Eastern Orthodox Church, including the prestige that the Hagia Sophia has attained on the global scale.[[9]](#footnote-8) This gave rise to polarising views on the matter; the conquest of the city was a triumph to the Muslims and an apocalyptic tragedy to the Christians.[[10]](#footnote-9) To illustrate, I depicted the grim conversations and prophecies heard by the author, portraying the negative sentiment of the Christians towards the Ottomans. At the same time, I chose the author to be non-religious as he would be less biased, giving a fairer assessment of the city.[[11]](#footnote-10) Finally, I included the minarets in the description of the Hagia Sophia as it was often noted as the symbol of Islam’s victory.[[12]](#footnote-11)

Lastly, I featured Constantinople’s status as a city of commerce, mainly through the popularity of its Grand Bazaar. I drew attention to the market’s solid design, largely thanks to the efforts of Ottoman engineers and architects. Its resistance to natural disasters and the protection it provides against the elements were what set it apart from other markets at the time; it minimised enterprise risk and the potential for reputational damage.[[13]](#footnote-12)

For a long time, the Ottomans controlled the trade entrepots along international trade routes.[[14]](#footnote-13) As a result, Constantinople dominated global trade,[[15]](#footnote-14) hence attracting all sorts of people to sell all sorts of goods.[[16]](#footnote-15) Also, the periods of peace between the Venetians and the Ottomans further allowed for coexistence.[[17]](#footnote-16) Consequently, it enabled merchants such as the author to purchase property in the city and make varied lifestyle choices, similar to early London’s reputation among traders.[[18]](#footnote-17)

I explained the guild system, which was integral to the market’s sustained success. Among other things, it imposed standards for traded goods as well as set guidelines for managing competition and innovation.[[19]](#footnote-18) This helped maintain stable business patterns and preserve traditional customs.[[20]](#footnote-19) This financial structure was quite a successful one for the time, similar to how the stock exchange was for Amsterdam.[[21]](#footnote-20) As such, I did my best to represent the author’s praise for the system.

Islam as a unifying religion was also a determinant for success. Its guilds were highly successful,[[22]](#footnote-21) replacing the previous Roman guilds.[[23]](#footnote-22) Following the lectures, this is partly because the Qur’an provides comprehensive guidelines for conducting trade;[[24]](#footnote-23) it upholds principles such as freedom, justice and manners.[[25]](#footnote-24) As a result, it is easier to trade with others within an Islam-based guild. In addition, merchants would often look after each other’s wares during prayer, instilling a deeper level of mutual trust and understanding.[[26]](#footnote-25) In my travelogue, I contrasted these customs with European standards, inciting the author’s envy.

In conclusion, the travelogue drew inspiration from lectures on Angkor Wat, London, Amsterdam and Melaka to explain why Constantinople succeeded as a city. By choosing a Christian Venetian merchant as my main character, I was able to specifically target the commercial and religious aspects of the city’s success. This in turn increased the believability of the writer’s motivations as well as his assessment of the city. I also detailed the strengths and vulnerabilities of the city’s defences, tying them into the travelogue in the form of grandfather stories. By putting myself into my character’s shoes, this project has enabled me to reflect upon the different reasons why people are attracted to cities. As such, I hope I did a good job portraying Constantinople’s significance as a city in world history.

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