



Summary :

The senate of Constantinople was founded by Constantine the Great and it incorporated the highest ranks of the Eastern Roman Empire's administration. Originally, this body played an important role, particularly in periods of political instability. After the end of the 6th century, it is uncertain whether the Senate continues to function as an independent political body. However, the senatorial class remains a distinctive group until the 11th century and it is largely identified with the ruling class of the Empire.

Date

4th -11th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Terminology and meaning

The term «Senate» (also *Boulè*)¹ in the Byzantine history has two distinctive meanings and it can denote:

- the superior institutional class (lat. *ordo*) in Byzantium, which is constituted by individuals who possess specific honorary titles or offices.
- a constituted body, the right of attendance in which belongs to the members of the senatorial class, in its entirety or partly. The role of this body is sometimes ceremonial and sometimes essential. In the second case, Senate can be also characterized as a political body.

The Senate is mentioned with the first meaning throughout the Byzantine history, though they do not always describe the same thing. On the contrary, it is doubtful whether the Senate continued to exist in the middle Byzantine period as a political body.

2. The senate in the early Byzantine period

The formation of the Constantinopolitan Senate is traditionally ascribed to [Constantine I](#) during the [foundation of the city](#) in 330 A.D. Today it is generally accepted that [Constantinople](#) gradually acquired the character of a capital of the empire, that of the [new Rome](#), during the first century of its existence. The Senate, which initially could not have been anything more than the city council of the city of Byzantium, follows a parallel development as an institution equivalent to that of the Roman Senate.² The new role of the Senate of Constantinople becomes visible during the period of Constantine II, who designates the legislative conditions for entering the Senate, and raises the number of members to 2000, a lot more than the *curiales* of any other city.

In order for someone to become a member of the Senate in the 4th century, there were some requirements which were briefly a) the acquisition of the honorary title of *λαμπροτάτου* (clarissimus), which accompanied the more important administrative offices and was given by the emperor, b) acceptance by the Senate itself (a practice surviving from the ancient Roman times, according to which an offspring of the senatorial order became acceptable in the body as soon as he undertook the annual office of the *praetor*) and c) an one-time considerable contribution in money, the *praetura*, echoing as well the spectacles and distributions that the ancient praetors made once they assumed their of duties.³

Practically, the members of new Senate came from the officials of the administration, and from certain *curiales* from the local councils of the cities of the Eastern empire, who were wealthy and had political interconnections, which they used to escape the heavy obligations of their old capacity once they were included in the Senate. Those who practised activities considered as disgraceful, such as workers, tradesmen and bankers, were excluded from the Senate. Soon the senatorial order took a different form, and new titles,



those of the *spectabilis* and the *illustris* were added, above the title of the *clarissimus*. While the number of senatorial members continued to increase, it seems that the privilege of participation in the sessions of this body was limited to the *illustris*, who in the end they were the only ones to be considered as senatorial members.⁴ This phenomenon, the “inflation” and the receding of honorary titles before new ones, is also observed in the later centuries.

3. Jurisdiction of the Senate

In the first two centuries following its establishment, the Senate of Constantinople as a body was given certain responsibilities, such as the care of city (a reminder of its initial character), formal ratification (without discussion or the possibility of intervention) of the laws that the emperor issued, and, more essentially, judicial responsibilities. Practically however the Senate, because of its composition, which reflected the administrative elite of the empire, could play important role in periods of instability or vacancy on the imperial throne, as it repeatedly happened during the second half of the 5th century. The sessions of the Senate would be chaired by the **prefect** of Constantinople, but also the office of the First of the Senate is attested.

4. Buildings of Senate

Two complexes are mentioned in the sources, the *Senata* or *Sinata*, where the sessions of the Senate would take place until the end of the 5th century. One of them, the most well-known, was in the **Augustaion**, the big central square between the **Great Palace** and **Hagia Sophia**, and the other was in the **forum** of Constantine, to the west (**fig. 2**).⁵ From descriptions we gather that these complexes included **basilicas** and **porticoes**, and they were decorated with many statues, both ancient ones, which had been **transferred to Constantinople** by other regions, and of contemporary personages whom the Senate wished to honour. Today no trace of these complexes survives. Both of them were burned and repeatedly rebuilt, and it seems they still existed in the 10th century, even in an altered form. However, from the years of **Justinian I** at the latest, the meetings of the Senate, if we can still call them so, took place in the palace.

5. The decline of Senate as body

It seems that from the end of the 6th century onward, the Senate ceases to be an independent body. From its previous responsibilities, only the judicial ones are still mentioned; and even in that capacity they were of no regular character and did not pertain to the whole body, but only to particular senatorial members. Henceforth, the main role of the Senate is informally advisory. It is likely that the decline of the Senate as a constitutional body is related with Justinian’s suspiciousness of the senatorial aristocracy, especially after the **Nika riot**. It is most likely that it was a very slow process, the stages of which are difficult to follow.⁶ It seems that from the 7th century onward the term Senate designates a council, which partakes in decision making with the emperor; it is however uncertain whether it is identified with the limited imperial council (the old *consistorium*) or if it was a more expanded council of the highest dignitaries. It is equally uncertain whether it was of a fixed composition or, on the contrary, if its composition depended each time on the emperor’s will. From the 11th century onward the term Senate does not appear to have a concrete meaning and it can either designate the court, **the aristocracy**, or the imperial council. This laxity in the use of the term implies that the Senate as a body does not exist anymore. What continues to exist up to the 11th century is the institutionally distinct senatorial class.

6. The senatorial class during the middle Byzantine period

During the middle Byzantine period the capacity of the member of the Senate is associated, as in the old days, with the acquisition of certain honorary titles, which are not hereditary. In the 11th century only those who had the title of **protospatharios** or higher were considered as members senatorial class (**fig. 3**).⁷

Such titles were necessarily conferred by the emperor and the beneficiary had to pay down a considerable lump sum. The profits were mainly symbolic: the authorisation to bring the insignias of the title, an honorary place in ceremonies or other gatherings, particular treatment in judicial affairs (e.g. the right of the members of the Senate not to take an oath in public, but in their house, or to



take their legal cases to special courts).⁸ There was also an annual salary, the *rhoga*, which was linked to the hierarchical classification of the title. In the eleventh century, particularly during the reign of Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055) and his [successors](#), the senatorial title began to be bestowed upon a growing number of people, including members of the middle class.

7. The end of the senatorial class

During the reign of [Alexios I Komnenos](#) (1081-1118), a new hierarchy is created, based on the degree of kinship to the emperor. The old titles were not abolished, but they lost their pecuniary value, as well as their prestige, and soon enough they ceased to be granted. The senatorial class virtually ceases to exist, and the only important social attribute, until the end of empire, is the noble origin. Even the use of term Senate/ Senatorial becomes more and more rare, although there is a resurgence of the term during the period of the [Palaiologoi](#). The term is used with various meanings. During the last two centuries of the empire, the most characteristic use of the term it is in order to distinguish the aristocracy from other social groups (army, church, middle classes) which are represented in collective decisionmaking bodies.

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1. On terminology, see Χριστοφιλοπούλου, Αικ., «Η Σύγκλητος εις το Βυζαντινόν Κράτος», *Επετηρίς του αρχείου της ιστορίας του ελληνικού δικαίου* 2 (1949), pp. 11-33.
 2. Dagron, G., Η γέννηση μίας πρωτεύουσας: Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451, translation M. Λουκάκη (Athens 2000), pp. 137-168.
 3. Dagron, G., Η γέννηση μίας πρωτεύουσας: Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451, translation M. Λουκάκη (Athens 2000), p. 177.
 4. Dagron, G., Η γέννηση μίας πρωτεύουσας: Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451, translation M. Λουκάκη (Athens 2000), pp. 188-190.
 5. Mango, C., *The Brazen House: A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople* (Copenhagen 1959), pp. 56-60; Dagron, G., Η γέννηση μίας πρωτεύουσας: Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451, translation M. Λουκάκη (Athens 2000), pp. 158-161.
 6. Dagron, G., Η γέννηση μίας πρωτεύουσας: Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451, translation M. Λουκάκη (Athens 2000), pp. 239-240, very briefly and concisely. The earlier works on the Senate (see, Χριστοφιλοπούλου, Beck in bibliography) ignore the inconsistency of the Senate as an institution. More recent works discuss the Senate in terms of a senatorial class but there is no detailed monograph concerning the composition and the evolution of the decisionmaking bodies.
 7. For an older phase, in the late 9th C., see. Oikonomidès, N., *Les listes de préséance Byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles* (Paris 1972), p. 295. On the 11th century, Lemerle, P., *Cinq études sur le XIe siècle Byzantin* (Paris 1977), p. 287.
 8. Alexios I issued a novella (in 1083?) with which he deprived the members of the Senate who were involved in commercial and other civil activities from this privilege: Zepos, I. -Zepos, P., *Jus Graecoromanum*, vol. I (Athens 1931), pp. 645-646.

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	Dagron G. , <i>Η γέννηση μιας πρωτεύουσας. Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451</i> , ΜΙΕΤ, Αθήνα 2000, Λουκάκη, Μ. (μτφρ.)
	Lemerle P. , <i>Cinq études sur le XIe siècle byzantin</i> , Paris 1977



	Beck H.-G. , <i>Senat und Volk von Konstantinopel. Probleme der byzantinischen Verfassungsgeschichte</i> , München 1966
	Χριστοφιλοπούλου Α. , "Η σύγκλητος εις το βυζαντινόν κράτος", <i>Επετηρίς του αρχείου της ιστορίας του ελληνικού δικαίου</i> , 2, 1949, 3-151
	Oikonomidès N. , <i>Les listes de préséance Byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles</i> , Paris 1972
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	Byzantium 1200 Senat House in the Forum Constantini http://www.arkeo3d.com/byzantium1200/senate2.html
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Glossary :

	basilica In ancient Roman architecture a large oblong type building used as hall of justice and public meeting place. The roman basilica served as a model for early Christian churches.
	curiales Curiales were the members of the city councils (gr.: <i>boule</i>) in the late Roman Empire. They belonged to the local aristocracy and were officials of the municipal administration, responsible for the normal functioning of the city's institutions as well as for local tax-collecting. A city's <i>boule</i> could count from 100 to 200 curiales, depending on the city's population.
	praefectus urbi (prefect of the city) (later referred to as the <i>eparch</i> of the city) Administrator and virtual governor of Constantinople in the Early/Middle Byzantine Era. He was responsible for the surveillance and the harmonious life of the Capital. One of his responsibilities was to control the commercial and manufacturing activities of Constantinople. After 1204, however, the office began to diminish, while from the 14th century, his responsibilities were assumed by two officers, the so-called <i>kephalatikeuntai of the capital</i> .
	praetor Political and juridical magistrate of the Roman Republic and the late Roman Empire. The title was originally borne by two magistrates who were chosen annually to serve as eponymous heads of the state, but the number of praetors increased within the years. The title was retained with intervals in the Early Byzantine Period. The office appeared again in the mid-9th cent. and denoted the governor of an administration unit of the empire. Hierarchically, the praetor was inferior to the strategos of the theme.
	protospatharios The first spatharios. A higher byzantine official of the imperial hierarchy which usually permitted participation in the senate. It was awarded even to eunuchs. After the 11th century, it gradually lost its importance. It was also an honorary title.
	stoa, portico, the A long building with a roof supported by one or two colonnades parallel to its back wall.

Sources

Hesychius, *Ιστορία Ρωμαϊκή τε και παντοδαπή*, Fr. 4.40-1, ed. K. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* IV (Paris 1851), p. 154.

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Quotations

The tradition on the establishment of the Senate of Constantinople at the same time with the foundation of the city:

a. Hesychius (4th C.): καὶ τοῖς ἀκολουθήσασιν αὐτῶ ἀπὸ τῆς μεγάλης Ῥώμης συγκλητικοῖς ἐφιλοτιμήσατο οἴκους, οὓς αὐτὸς κατεσκεύασεν ἐκ χρημάτων ἰδίων... Ἐπὶ δὲ τούτοις καὶ τοὺς τῆς συγκλήτου βουλῆς ἀνφοκοδόμησεν οἴκους, Σενάτα τούτους ὀνομάσας καὶ τὴν τῶν βασιλείων αὐλήν.

Hesychius, *Ἱστορία Ῥωμαϊκὴ τε καὶ παντοδαπὴ*, [Fr. 4].40-1, ed. K. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* IV (Paris 1851), p. 154.

b. Sozomenos (5th C.): βουλευτήριόν τε μέγα, ἦν σύγκλητον ὀνομάζουσιν, ἕτερον συνεστήσατο, τὰς αὐτὰς τάξας τιμὰς καὶ ἱερομηνίας ἣ καὶ Ῥωμαίοις τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις ἔθος.

Bidez, J. - Hansen, G.C. (ed.), *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte* (Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller 50, Berlin 1960).

c. Zosimos (5th C.): ἔδωκε μὲν τῇ πόλει γερουσίαν ἔχειν ὥσπερ ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ

Zosimos, *Historia Nova* III.11.3, ed. F. Paschoud, *Zosime. Histoire nouvelle*, 2 (Paris 1979).

δ. Theophanes (9th C.): κτίζων Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ εὐσεβῆς τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν Ῥώμην νέαν χρηματίζειν ταύτην ἐθέσπισε, καὶ σύγκλητον ἔχειν ἐκέλευσε.

De Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis chronographia*, 1 (Leipzig 1883, repr. Hildesheim 1963), p. 28

The «Senate» accompanies Michael VIII as he enters in the recaptured Constantinople in August of 1261:

Ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς, συνταξάμενος ὅσον ἦν τὸ περὶ αὐτόν, ἔχων μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν αὐγούσταν, ἔτι δὲ καὶ τὸ νεογιλὸν θάλος τὸν ἐξ ἐκεῖνης Ἀνδρόνικον... συνάμα τῇ γερουσίᾳ πάση καὶ τῇ συγκλήτῳ τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς πόλεως ᾤδευε καὶ δὴ, περαιωσάμενος τὸν Ἑλλησποντον, ἐκεῖθεν ἐχώρει πρὸς τὸ Βυζάντιον. Ἐλθὼν δὲ καὶ τὴν Χρυσέαν πύλην κατειληφώς, ἐκεῖ καθήμενος εφ' ἡμέραις, τὴν ἐς πόλιν εἰσοδόν, ὅπως θεοφιλῶς ἅμα καὶ μεγαλοπρεπῶς γένοιτο, ἀνεσκόπει τε καὶ συνέταπτε.

Failler, A. (ed.), *Geroges Pachmérés, Relations Historiques*, 1 (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 24.1, Paris 1984), p. 217.