

# BYZANTINE TRADE

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**Overview** From the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., Byzantium became synonymous with luxury, much of it generated by international trade; it is estimated that, from the later 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. until the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantium was the seat of the world's most prosperous economy. As those dates indicate, however, the Byzantine economy, and trade, were subject to numerous ups and downs; for example to the Arab-Islamic attacks of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, C.E., which were a dreadful blow to Byzantine commerce, and, at the other end of the prosperity centuries, to the economic meltdown of Byzantium in the last two centuries before it fell to the Ottoman Turks (1453 C.E.)

**Travel routes and trading partners** We consider a thousand years, in reviewing the trading history of Byzantium. In the broadest sense, the map is the arbiter of the commercial history of this period, for it placed Byzantium, like Istanbul after it, at a pivotal trading point from which to reach inland to the Black Sea and beyond, southward into the Mediterranean, and then far beyond, eastward in the Mediterranean, southward into the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the waters of East Asia. By land, eastward, Byzantium was increasingly part of the variously available overland routes called The Silk Road.

**What was traded** Dependent on the time period, the markets of Byzantium particularly favored trade in silk and grain. The former was essential for supplying the luxury needs of the upscale market in Byzantium, although the widespread use of silk was not confined to upscale gowns and lingerie for the fine ladies of Alexandria and Antioch, but was employed for such uses as mummy wrapping or reliquary lining. Grain was an essential commodity for the regulation of consumer markets throughout the empire. In addition to these commodities, there was huge traffic between Byzantium and its trading partners--particularly those North Italian trading cities--Venice and Genoa and Amalfi--which not only traded but bankrolled many a Byzantine trading venture. Other Byzantine commodities widely trafficked, on an international level, included oil, wine, fish, meat, vegetables, and, yes, even slaves.

## Reading

Nicolle, David, *Constantinople 1453: The End of Byzantium*, Oxford, 2000.

Haldon, John, *Byzantium: A History*, Gloucestershire, 2002.

## Discussion questions

What kind of taxation and supply control did the Byzantine government exercise, over the products shipped in and out of their ports? The government-imposed tax, on both imports and exports, was typically 10%. Were there efforts to evade taxation, by smuggling?

Our stress above was on international trade. How were local and regional trading arrangements established? Was there general oversight over regional trade? How were prices set? Were local markets part of uncontrolled private enterprise?

The Islamic interventions of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. marked a sharp set back to the Byzantine economy. How did this setback affect the guy on the streets in Byzantium? Was there unemployment? Rampant poverty?