

PORT CITY TALKS.

ISTANBUL.
ANTWERP.

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Port of Istanbul: A Short History

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Istanbul and Antwerp are two important ports at the antipodes of the European continent. Formed under very different geographical conditions with very different social histories, both rose swiftly to prominence at different phases of maritime trade history, never losing their functions despite long periods of stagnation and relative regression, and both are in our day important hubs of global sea traffic. Yet, when analysed in the *longue durée*, the histories of these two ports have a reverse cyclical relationship. While Istanbul was a world emporium in the late Middle Ages (eleventh century), Antwerp was a relatively small port on a river network stretching through the hinterlands of Europe. Although Antwerp was not the port to gain the most advantage from commercial ties between northern Italy and northwestern Europe, it was among the most important of those that ensured the break of bulk between river and sea transport networks. The foundation of the Atlantic economy in the sixteenth century did not affect the two port cities in the same way. While Antwerp, like all northwestern European cities, gained importance with the foundation of the Atlantic economy and the increasing importance of long-distance trade, the same factors triggered an era of stagnation for Istanbul and its port that would last until the mid-nineteenth century. But in the history of port cities, win-win conditions are the exception, not the rule.

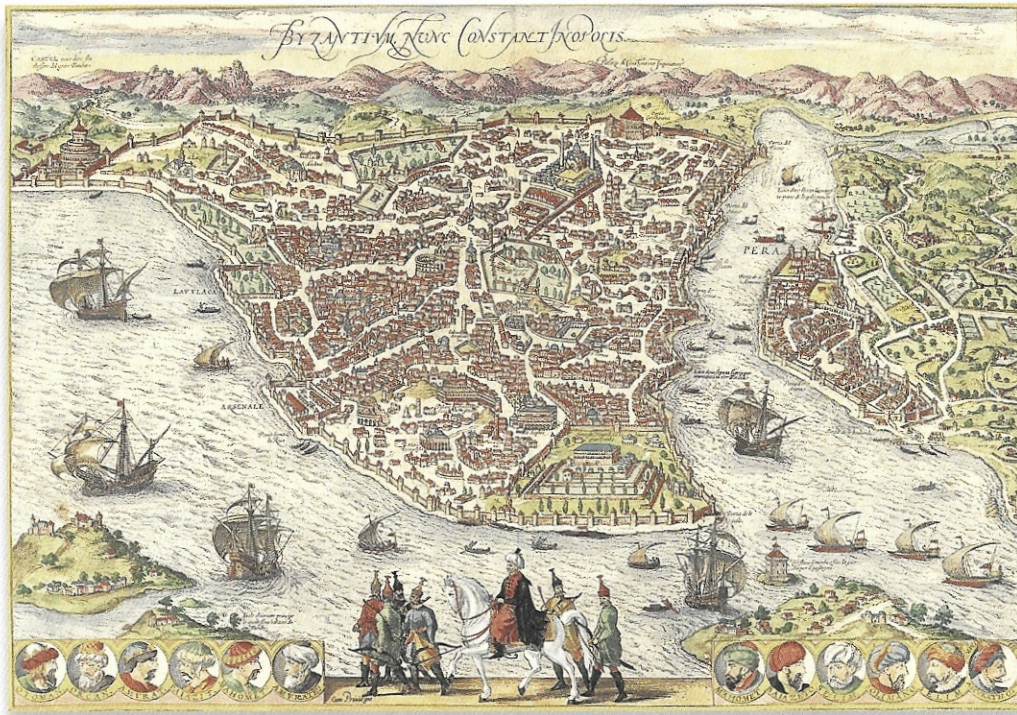
Subsequent to centuries of wealth and prosperity, during the long period that could be described as 'the waning of the Mediterranean', Istanbul, thanks to its resilience as a gateway city, was, along with Marseille and Venice, one of the port cities least affected. While long-distance trade swiftly lost importance in Istanbul during this period, regional sea transport and the shipping of cereals across the Black Sea, limited to feeding the city, and trade by way of the Danube, which ensured water transport between all the cities important for the southeast European settlement system, never ceased. Venice, which controlled access to continental Europe through the valleys and passes of the Alps, Marseille, through the Rhône valley, and Istanbul, as the transit point of Danube-connected river traffic with eastern Europe and sea traffic with Russia and the Caucasus, retained strategic importance due to their gateway city functions.

Istanbul's geographical importance is due to its position and its function as a gateway city. But mere location beside an important strait is not enough to gain a city the status of a gateway. At this point we should make a distinction between gateway cities important in a military sense on the one hand, and economic and political gateway cities on the other. For instance, the location of Troy and Gallipoli on the Dardanelles made them important militarily, while from an economic point of view they were secondary centres. While the strategic importance of Gallipoli in a military sense cannot be denied, at no time in history did it acquire the status of a centre of world trade to rival Istanbul in an economic and political sense.

The opening of the Mediterranean to steam navigation in the first half of the nineteenth century triggered important economic, political, ecological and social transformations in the history of this internal sea. Let us remember that steam navigation coincided with the declaration of the Ottoman reforms known as *Tanzimat*. The regularly scheduled sea transport that steam navigation permitted increased the importance of Istanbul's maritime connections, as it did that of the port. Despite the inadequacy of the Port of Istanbul's cargo-handling facilities and lack of a modern passenger terminal, it became one of the most important import and passenger ports for the Mediterranean, Black Sea and the Balkans. The population of the city, approximately 300,000 in the 1830s, quadrupled at the start of the twentieth century to 1.2 million. Although it had relations with all Mediterranean ports, for the obvious reasons Fernand Braudel indicated, the busiest scheduled connections were with the Adriatic port of Trieste, Constanța near the mouth of the Danube, and Marseille. Until the establishment of railway ties with Europe in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, travel from Istanbul to Central Europe was by way of Trieste or Constanța, and to northwestern Europe by way of Marseille or Toulon.

While the southern Mediterranean connections through Aden to Port Said, Cyprus, Malta and Gibraltar gained importance after the opening of the Suez Canal, the port functions of Istanbul did not develop at the tempo implied by its increase in population, which increased nearly fourfold in the nineteenth century. And there was no noteworthy development in its port technology or waterfront construction until the end of the 1890s. At the same time, in order to answer increasing demand for intra-urban transport, pontoon bridges were built over the the internal harbour formed by the Golden Horn, which interrupted the network of external trade connections in the most important part of the harbour and led to the loss of a crucial area of the port. Istanbul was thus forced to carry on its port business within the extremely limited middle harbour sector defined by the mouth of the Golden Horn, Galata Bridge, Seraglio Point (Sarayburnu) and Tophane.

However, due to patterns of land ownership and high prices in this area, which overlapped with the city's central business district, neither the storage space needed for port activities nor sufficient depth for the operation of cranes could be secured. Despite significant technological improvements, such as the construction of quays and docks, the activities of the port on the whole were not managed and industrialized by European standards. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Istanbul was important for Caspian oil transport but remained, with its labour-intensive cargo-handling technology and insufficient storage and customs facilities, an underdeveloped port. Under these conditions it was impossible for Istanbul to compete in twentieth-century sea trade. It appeared inevitable that the port would be swiftly modernized and operated as an industrial centre, but things did not turn out as expected. The sea blockade that began with the First World War, the Black Sea's loss of commercial importance after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the occupation of Istanbul following the Armistice, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the formation of nation states in the Balkans and in the Middle East, the declaration of the Turkish Republic and the foundation of the new capital in Ankara were not positive developments for Istanbul and its economic life. With the abolition of advantages granted to foreign nationals after the establishment of the Republic and the flight of the local Rûm population from the city after 1918, the continuity and security of labour and income that capital city status had ensured Istanbul were lost, and the 1927 census showed a reduction of the population by half since the beginning



Constantinople (formerly Byzantium)
 Shortly after publication, this map of Constantinople became a classic view of the city.

Hand-coloured engraving
 Cologne, 1580
 Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg
 Murat Tabanlıoğlu Collection

of the century. That the volume of ship traffic and tonnage in the port did not rise at a time when world trade was developing, though not swiftly, is the clearest sign of the stagnation in the city's economy. The negative effects of the situation on the port and waterfront were extreme. The volume of maritime traffic was no greater than that of the early twentieth century, and in some years even less. In this regard, although the need to modernize the backward port technology was obvious, because of this narrowing volume of external trade it was not considered urgent. We have detailed information about the situation and its organizational structure during the first quarter of the twentieth century: *İstanbul Limanı 1929* (The Port of Istanbul, 1929) by Ahmet Hamdi, director of the Port of Istanbul Monopoly founded in 1926, has the character of a master plan. It lays out in detail the insufficiencies and weakness of the Port of Istanbul and the subsequent losses of goods and money incurred, lists the measures that need to be taken, and discusses and justifies the investments that should be made. The findings of this extremely valuable study, carried out as the Great Depression commenced, could not, for obvious reasons, be applied under the conditions of the crisis and the war years of 1939–45, but it may be said to be a masterpiece on the specificities of the Port of Istanbul and, as such, it constitutes an invaluable source for its institutional, social, economic and technological history and for a comparative history of ports in general. We should emphasize that Hamdi often mentions Antwerp, in passing, as a 'success story' and as a source of inspiration. It would be very difficult to understand or explain the Port of Istanbul's problems without studying the details of the processes presented in this work. It is of no surprise that twenty-five years after it was written the recommendations of the report were carried out to the letter.

The restructuring of world trade and finance institutions and the rebuilding of destroyed economies after the Second World War led to important increases in the volume of world trade. The Port of Istanbul's long stagnation was expected to end. But after a brief period of vigour, the heightening of the Cold War, the foreign currency bottleneck stemming from the the swift demand for imports triggered by urbanization, the institution of the quota system, the inability to balance imports and exports due to the fall in prices of agricultural produce, and the rising external trade deficit, resulted, in 1958, in the most significant devaluation in the history of the Turkish Republic. The value of the Turkish lira relative to the US dollar fell from 2.85 to 9.13. While economic relations came to a standstill, in Istanbul there was no change in

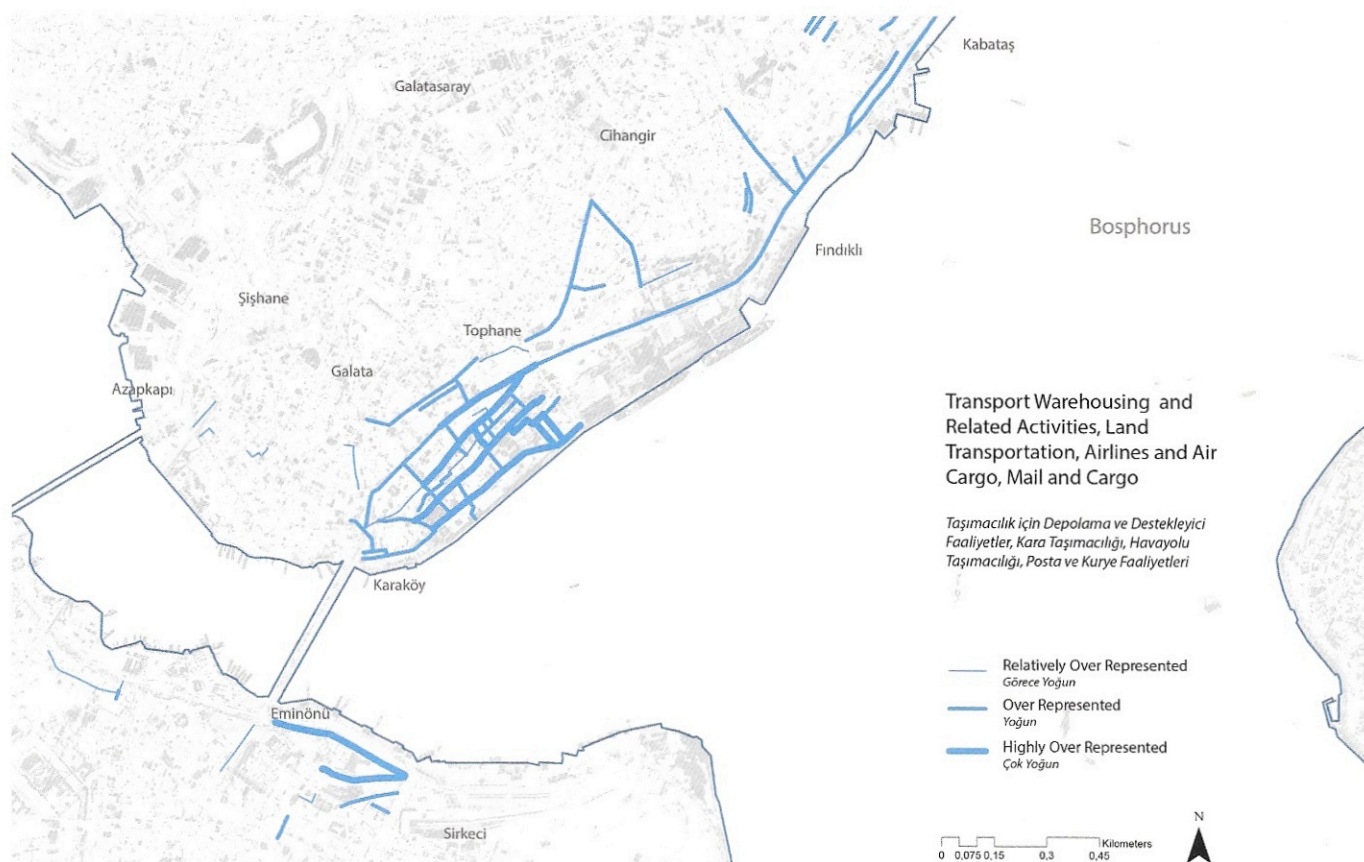
Antwerp, noble city in Brabant
Bird's-eye view of Antwerp, from
the south side

Coloured etching
Cologne, 1580
Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg
Museum Plantin-Moretus /
Prentenkabinet, Antwerp,
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work volume that one could call a qualitative break. The great majority of ships in the port were moored to buoys at sea, as in the past, and using difficult, labour-intensive technology, cargo was sorted in the holds and unloaded by crane onto barges in choppy waters and fast-flowing currents. Ships waited at sea for days while their cargoes were transferred to barges – covered with tarpaulins and under round-the-clock surveillance – in order to get through customs formalities. Furthermore, conditions were no different for the few lucky ships able to dock at port, due to the area for unloading cargo being so narrow and inadequate that goods loaded onto barges also had to wait for days, exposed to risks and under strict surveillance. Under these difficult conditions the cargo-handling capacity of the Port of Istanbul was approximately 1 per cent of that of northwestern European ports. These pre-industrial methods raised the cost of cargo handling, and the lines of barges waiting to be unloaded formed a seascape not seen in any developed port. Without any doubt, it is shocking, to put it mildly, that this irrational, unsustainable way of working, making it impossible for the city economy and the port to compete in the international marketplace, was maintained until the late 1950s. These practices, which made barge-handling one of the most profitable sectors, continued so long due to the quota system – which made imports more difficult and expensive as time went on – and the high cost of construction required for the modernization of the port. In the 1950s the Port of Istanbul was a problem area, and although the solution was known to all, no measures were taken because it was not urgent and thus could be put off for another decade.

The construction, however, in the mid-1950s of 600-metre-long modern quays between Salıpazarı and Fındıklı, capable of serving five ships at a time, was undoubtedly a major investment in port facilities. Though earlier practices did not come to an end, the handling capacity of this new port with large storage areas and warehouses was way above previous facilities. It would be difficult to justify the building of a port without urgent need in a situation where imports had come to a standstill and foreign currency and import permits were sold on the black market. With imports at a standstill due to the foreign currency bottleneck, one would expect priority to be given to export ports. In this context, establishing a modern import port in Istanbul was as difficult to understand as investment in such export waterfronts as Izmir and Mersin was meaningful. But the Port of Istanbul had specialized in imports because



STREETSCAPES OF ISTANBUL'S WATERFRONT by Murat Güvenç, 2015

it was located far from the domestic market. The Bosphorus and the Marmara Sea, and their topography, were major obstacles. It is true that the port worked according to an outdated system, but the executed port project was debatable in terms of scale and timing, and apparently there were no pressing demands. Firstly, while the port problem was ameliorated, in the absence of a Bosphorus bridge, unloading cargo imported for the domestic market on the European side and taking it across by ferryboat to the Asian shore, created additional problems. Secondly, the great majority of industrial enterprises were located on the European side, on the Historic Peninsula and along the shores of the Golden Horn, so how meaningful could it be to build a modern import waterfront on the Beyoğlu side and try to convey the goods unloaded there to industrial areas through heavy urban traffic? Thirdly, the scale of the project was very small relative to what an import waterfront could have been under existing conditions in Turkey. While no less than 7,000 metres of waterfront and warehousing were built for the modernization of Piraeus in the early 1930s, building a modern port in Istanbul consisted of a 600-metre waterfront and only five large warehouses. This may have been expected to alleviate problems but would not bring a sustainable solution. Also, while valid, it does not explain the choice of location for the modern port. It was true that Istanbul did not have a port in the modern sense, but the construction of a modern port at the very central business district, on a very small scale, with at least thirty years' delay, without facilities for conveying goods to industrial areas, without railway connections, may be considered among the worst planning errors in the history of the city.

The establishment of the Salıpazarı port was a short-sighted, belated investment, much smaller than it should have been, made without an understanding of context and wrong in terms of timing and selection of location. It created far more problems than it solved. While the Tophane barracks were torn down in order to create a grand, modern-type public space by the sea, the modern port, which gave the impression of being built in accordance with Hamdi's 1929 site plan, could hardly make the contribution that was expected. Because its capacity was insufficient, the use of barges to serve ships moored 350 metres out to sea continued. It was, in brief, too

little and too late as an effort to modernize the Port of Istanbul, and so it was used for a short period of only fifteen years. The beginning of the construction of the Bosphorus Bridge in 1969 was considered a golden opportunity to correct this flagrant planning mistake. The Salıpaazarı port was gradually abandoned and cargo-handling facilities were moved to Haydarpaşa.

However, the city paid dearly for this colossal planning error. With the loss of very important architectural heritage such as the Tophane barracks, a unique urban zone that could, with inventive design, have been used for cultural functions or as public space became unusable, forbidden ground, stolen from the everyday life of citizens. There is no doubt that if the Salıpaazarı port had not been built, Istanbul would have preserved an extremely valuable public space, the lack of which we suffer from today. The great success of İstanbul Modern, built on the site a half century later, sheds much light on what the city lost. It is still not too late, but with the recent proposals to turn this area into a cruise-ship port, to what degree this goal can be achieved is doubtful. After the port was moved to Haydarpaşa, the barge business swiftly lost importance and the proliferation of barges in the Golden Horn, a hallmark of Istanbul during the 1950s, gradually disappeared. In sum, the modern port era of Istanbul, supposed to be a port city for millennia, lasted only ten years and no one much minded when it disappeared...

The port at Haydarpaşa developed swiftly during the 1960s. During this period small industry sites formed vertically disintegrated production complexes and became decentralized. As a result of the import substitution policies stringently applied by successive governments, Istanbul, which had first specialized in external trade and service industries, swiftly became an overgrown industrial city. As might be expected, the locations chosen for the great majority of Fordist production facilities were in the eastern Marmara region or along the metropolis's E5 highway, for easiest access to the domestic market. Istanbul began to take on the shape of a polycentric, sprawled city region, though not as swiftly as in similar examples in developed western countries.

A large portion of the tax income and added value of more than half the industrial institutions in Turkey is produced in this urban region, whose population is larger than some European countries. The port system formed on the shores of the Marmara by this vast area is not as distinct as the port complexes around Antwerp, as one can see if one views them via Google Earth. The urban region formed around Istanbul connects to the outside world not through the Port of Istanbul, but by way of the free trade region and small piers and private ports numbering in the hundreds on the Marmara shores. Hence, as far as port facilities and maritime transport are concerned, there are unprecedented improvements and developments. Problems stemming from decades of stagnation and technological backwardness and inadequate management have been significantly improved and alleviated within a relatively short span of time. While it may not appear as concentrated and distinct as what one observes in the environs of Antwerp, the Marmara Sea as a whole can be regarded as a global port system of the emerging Istanbul city region.

Just as the Port of Venice forms a very small part of the Venetian port system, so the port visible in Istanbul forms a very small part of the ties between the outside world and the global city of Istanbul. Nowadays we must speak less of a Port of Istanbul than an intricate, distributed, specialized, differentiated ports complex that establishes the links between this urban region and the outside world. Unlike the northwestern European ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, London and so on, the Marmara Sea accommodates complex port systems. The sea transport connections the Istanbul urban region has formed with the outside world are by way of these post-industrial ports and docks, making extensive use of new port and communication technologies.

This book accompanies the exhibition *Port City Talks. Istanbul – Antwerp* whose narrative is based on discovering the relationships between a port and its hinterland, taking as examples the landmarks and maritime entities of Istanbul and Antwerp. Via works that have been produced largely by young artists, the narrative – in which objects are placed in a multimedia setting – explores what a port and the presence of water mean for the two cities.

Taking us on a walk through Istanbul, a transit city in continual transition, we aim to introduce alternative views of both Istanbul and Antwerp, redefined by artists' points of view and enriched by archaeological objects and historical material. Digital works appear on the inner walls of a light white construction, an abstraction of Istanbul's shoreline.

—Murat Tabanlıoğlu, curator of the exhibition *Port City Talks. Istanbul – Antwerp*

