



Golden Gate

Summary :

The Golden Gate is a portal near the southern end of Theodosius II's Land Walls of Constantinople. Not a normal city gate, it was the entry point for the triumphal processions of Byzantine Emperors into their capital, and, in later times, the basis for a fortress.

Date

388-391 or 405-413

Geographical Location

Constantinople, Istanbul

Topographical Location

Near the southern end of the Theodosian walls, c. 6.5 km from Marmara Sea

1. Topography

The Golden Gate is the second passage in the double-circuit of the [Theodosian Land Walls](#) north of the Sea of [Marmara](#), its two flanking pylons representing the walls' ninth and tenth towers. Beyond the eleventh tower is the third portal to which popular convention later transferred the unofficial label of 'Golden Gate' ?

The ninth and tenth towers incorporate a triple-arch gateway into the Land Walls' inner circuit. These towers themselves are enlarged as deep and wide pylons, containing large interior chambers. The pylons create a courtyard some 17×30 m. before the triple gateway. An extension of the outer wall by some 12 m. further before the gateway expands that courtyard, opening to the moat beyond through a single (outer) gate, itself flanked by two square towers.¹

The triple gateway and its complex were, in the Byzantine era, adorned with statuary, among which a statue of Theodosios I which fell during the earthquake of October 740, on a chariot dragged by four elephants, commemorating a triumph entrance of Theodosios I in Constantinople (A.D. 384/7); also reliefs, inscriptions, war trophies, and even frescoes, together with the golden decoration, attributed by Malalas to Theodosios II (maybe erroneously), that gave the gate the name of *Porta Aurea*. Of all this decor, only the smallest fragments have been recorded or preserved.²

2. History and Uses

The date of the construction of the Golden Gate is uncertain. Scholars have long debated on whether it was the work of [Theodosios I](#) (r. 378-395) or of Theodosios II (r. 408-450). Usually the gate is considered as more or less contemporary to the Theodosian Walls, although it has been observed that the triple arch with its flanking towers represent a prior phase compared with the curtain in which they have been incorporated.³ An inscription commemorating the victory of Theodosios over a 'tyrant' has been therefore read as referring to the victory of Theodosios II over the usurper John (A.D. 425). However, J. Bardill has recently argued that the inscription is not a later addition to the monument and therefore it must date before A.D. 413, the year by which, according to the *Codex Theodosianus*, the Theodosian Wall was complete. Furthermore, the 5th-c. columns and capitals of the arches are considered later additions. He therefore concludes that the Golden Gate was originally constructed as a **triumphal arch** of Theodosios I, between A.D. 388 and 391, and the tyrant mentioned must have been the defeated Maximus. Besides, the triple arch seems to imitate earlier Roman triumphal triple-portal arches of [Septimius Severus](#) and [Constantine I](#) in Rome.⁴

The arch was built on the course of the triumphal way leading from the [Hebdomon](#) to Constantinople, on the then-outskirts of the city beyond the older [walls of Constantine](#) the Great. When the present Land Walls were built in 413 and 447 under Theodosios II, the triumphal arch was absorbed into the newer fortifications. But its triumphal significance was retained, its use reserved for ceremonial



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occasions, usually involving the emperor. Occasionally, as a special honor, important foreign visitors were admitted through it: thus, papal legates (519, 868), and even the pope himself (708). But normally the Golden Gate was the starting point for the festive entry of the emperor into the city, to celebrate military victories or other major occasions. The crowds of retainers, soldiers, captives, and trophies, marshalled beyond the outer gate, would formed at the triple portal for the emperor to lead the procession into the city's center.

We read in the sources of many such festivities throughout Byzantine history, the last notable occasion being the entry of [Michael VIII Palaiologos](#) (r. 1260-1282) into Constantinople in [1261](#) after its recovery from the [Latin occupation](#).

Beyond ceremonial uses, the Golden Gate still served military purposes.⁵ It withstood attacks by Vitalian's Huns (514), by the Arabs (670s), by the Bulgars of Khan Krum (813) and Tsar Symeon (913). But, with days of glory past in the [Palaiologan era](#), the Golden Gate was secured and eventually walled up, its area built into a fortress, that John V (1341-1391) alternately reduced and restored,⁶ amid Turkish pressures and domestic strife.

During the siege that led to the [fall of Constantinople](#) in 1453, Sultan Mehmet II mounted a cannon against the Golden Gate. Under the Turks the Byzantine fortifications were expanded into the present fortress of Yedikule (Seven Towers), used as a dreaded prison, and now a museum.

1. Turnbull, S., *The Walls of Constantinople AD 324-1453* (Fortress 25, Oxford 2004), pp. 20-22, plan 21.

2. Janin, R., *Constantinople Byzantin. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique* (Paris ²1964), pp. 270; Mango, C., «The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate,» *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), pp. 182-3.

3. Janin, R., *Constantinople Byzantin. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique* (Paris ²1964), pp. 269-70; Mango, C., «The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate,» *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), p. 179, n. 45.

4. Bardill, J., «The Golden Gate in Constantinople: A Triumphal Arch of Theodosius I,» *American Journal of Archaeology* 103.4 (1999), pp. 673-686; see also Wheeler M., 'The Golden Gate of Constantinople,' Moorey, P., Roger, S. and Parr, P. (eds), *Archaeology in the Levant. Essays for Kathleen Kenyon* (Warminster 1978), pp. 238-41.

5. Turnbull, S., *The Walls of Constantinople AD 324-1453* (Fortress 25, Oxford 2004), pp. 34-35.

6. Mango, C., «The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate,» *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), pp. 181-2.

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	Porta Aurea (Golden Gate) http://www.byzantium1200.com/p-aura.html
	The Golden Gate in Constantinople: A Triumphal Arch of Theodosius I - Abstract http://www.jstor.org/pss/507077
	The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate http://www.doaks.org/publications/doaks_online_publications/DOP54/DP54ch9.pdf

Glossary :

	triumphal arch (Rom.) A structure in the shape of a monumental archway, built to celebrate the victory of a Roman general or Emperor. (Byz. Archit.) The arch formed above the Horaia Pyle (Royal Door), which frames the curve of the conch of the apse and separates the bema from the nave.
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Sources

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Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, 1 (Leipzig 1883; repr. Hildesheim 1963), p. 412.

Constantine Porphyrogenitos, *De cerimoniis*, ed. J.J. Reiske, *De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*, 1 (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1829).

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George Cedrenos, *Historiarum compendium*, ed. I. Bekker, *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae ope*, 1 (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1838), p. 567.

Manuel Chrysoloras, "Epistola ad Johannem imp." (Epistle to the Emperor John), *Patrologia Graeca* 156, col. 48 A-B.

Quotations



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The inscription on the Golden Gate

Haec loca Theodosius decorat post fata tyranni
aurea saecla gerit qui portam construit auro

[Theodosios decorates this place after the death of a tyrant/ he who builds the gate with gold rules the golden age]

Janin, R., *Constantinople Byzantin* (Paris ²1964), p. 269; trans. J. Bardill, «The Golden Gate...» *AJA* 103.4 (1999), p. 683.

Theodosios II glides the Golden Gate

ὁ δὲ αὐτὸς Θεοδόσιος ἐχρῦσωσε καὶ τῆς Δαφνητικῆς πόρτας δύο θύρας τὰς χαλκᾶς καθ' ὁμοιότητα ἧς ἐχρῦσωσε πόρτας ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει, ἣτις καλεῖται ἕως ἄρτι ἡ χρυσεᾶ πόρτα· ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ τῇ μεγάλῃ καλεῖται ἕως τῆς νῦν ἡ χρυσεᾶ πόρτα, χρυσωθεῖσα διὰ Νυμφιδιανοῦ ὑπατικοῦ.

John Malalas, *Chronographia*, Dindorf, L. (ed.), *Ioannis Malalae chronographia* (CSHB, Bonn 1831), p. 360.

The fall of the statue of Theodosios I from the Golden Gate in the earthquake of 740

Καὶ τῷ αὐτῷ ἔτει σεισμός γέγονε μέγας καὶ φοβερός ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει μηνὶ Ὀκτωβρίῳ κς', ἰνδικτικῶνος θ', ἡμέρα δ', ὥρα η', καὶ ἐπτώθησαν ἐκκλησίαι καὶ μοναστήρια [...] καὶ ὁ ἀνδριάς τοῦ μεγάλου Θεοδοσίου, ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς Χρυσῆς πόρτης...

Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, 1 (Leipzig 1883; repr. Hildesheim 1963), p. 412.

The statues of elephants commemorating Theodosios I's triumph on the Golden Gate

ὅτι οἱ ἐλέφαντες οἱ ἐν τῇ χρυσῇ πόρτῃ ὅμοιοί εἰσιν ὧν πάλαι Θεοδόσιος ἐπιβᾶς εἰς τὴν πόλιν εἰσήλασεν

George Cedrenos, *Historiarum compendium*, ed. I. Bekker, *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae ope*, 1 (CSHB, Bonn 1838), p. 567.

Marble reliefs adorning the Golden Gate

Ἐὼ γὰρ τοὺς πρὸ τῆς πύλης. Ἦν καὶ αὐτὴν καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ μαρμαρίνους πύργους τίς ἂν ἀξίως δύναίτο θαυμάσαι, ἄθλους Ἡρακλέους ἀρίστης καὶ θαυμασιωτάτης τέχνης, καὶ Προμηθέως βάσανον, καὶ τοιαῦτα ἕτερα ἀπὸ μαρμάρου.

Manuel Chrysoloras, "Epistola ad Johannem imp." (Epistle to the Emperor John), *Patrologia Graeca* 156, col. 48 A-B.