



THE FURNITURE FILES

WEEKLY ISSUE - 2

THE HISTORY OF FURNITURE - ONE PIECE AT A TIME

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Why Does Next To No Byzantine Furniture Exist Today?

The Byzantine Era refers to the Eastern half of the Roman Empire between the 5th century and around 1000 years later in 1453, concluding with the fall of the capital Constantinople. Due to the location of the capital city, on the Bosphorous Strait conveniently between Europe and Asia, Constantinople became a wealthy hub. This wealth, and government incentives of free land and tax benefits to nobles, merchants and skilled workers, influenced



many to make the move. Along with the promise of work and trade, Constantinople offered safety and protection due to its fortress-like structures, not to mention it being surrounded by water on three sides providing a strong defence from invasions.

There is no singular style that can be attributed to such a vast proportion of history, but there were some consistencies and

overlapping influences. Pieces were inspired heavily by Roman and Greek design, however, whereas Greek design focused on natural, organic lines and forms and prioritised comfort, the influx of wealth in the area, as well as the influences of Empress Theodora (discussed in issue 1), encouraged a shift towards opulence and using furniture as a measure of status and power. In contrast to the marble columns and lifelike sculptures that are synonymous with Greek design, Byzantine pieces were more 2 dimensional featuring carvings with predominantly Christian imagery. As a city that was not only a cultural melting pot, but had no shortage of affluent noblemen and women and a plethora of highly skilled craftsman it is easy to imagine the evolution of the intricate, luxurious designs.





Unfortunately the majority of what we know about the furniture from this period is reliant heavily on mosaics and records from the time as very few complete examples still exist today. One of the most significant reasons for this being, that they were primarily constructed using perishable wood at the core and leaned towards heavy textile use including silks and velvet which would have long since decomposed. These wooden frames were often covered in ivory panels, precious metal inlays and gemstones, which would have been subject to centuries of looting and pilfering.

Constantinople was subject to various riots due to civil unrest, the most notable one being the Nika riots in 532 AD, which began at a chariot race. Sporting rivals united against Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora setting fires all over the city - destroying large parts of it! As secular furniture would have been predominantly wood and fabric, a huge percentage would most likely have succumbed to the fire.

A notable, high profile casualty of the riots included the second iteration of the Hagia Sophia - built in 415 which was a church known as Magna Ecclesia. Despite being impressive for it's time, boasting marble carving and a grand entrance, the church had a wooden roof which ultimately contributed to its destruction during the riots. As a result the church was rebuilt into the Hagia Sophia that still stands today comprising of some of the most awe inspiring feats of architecture and craftsmanship - we will go into more detail on these in an upcoming article.

In the later Byzantine Era, Constantinople saw two brutally violent riots in a relatively short period of time, The Massacre of the Latins (1118) and The Fourth Crusade (1204). Secondary to the thousands of lives lost, countless homes and possessions were destroyed, and particularly in the case of the crusades the majority of the city had been looted.

Finally, any remaining Byzantine artifacts would likely have been lost to the Ottoman Conquest. This saw the Ottomons cross into Europe in the 1300's, slowly taking control of the Balkan region, culminating in breaching the Constantinople walls and subsequent fall of the city, and with it the Byzantine Empire. Under control of the new leader, imperial spaces and fixtures were systematically repurposed and wooden furnishings discarded or burned for fuel.

Despite all of this, a few fragments did manage to survive to modern day, as well as an incredibly limited handful of complete pieces. It is a shame that such a significant portion of history with so many pieces, both modest and lavish are lost and we are unable to appreciate their craftsmanship or gain a greater understanding of how an average citizen of Constantinople would have lived.

