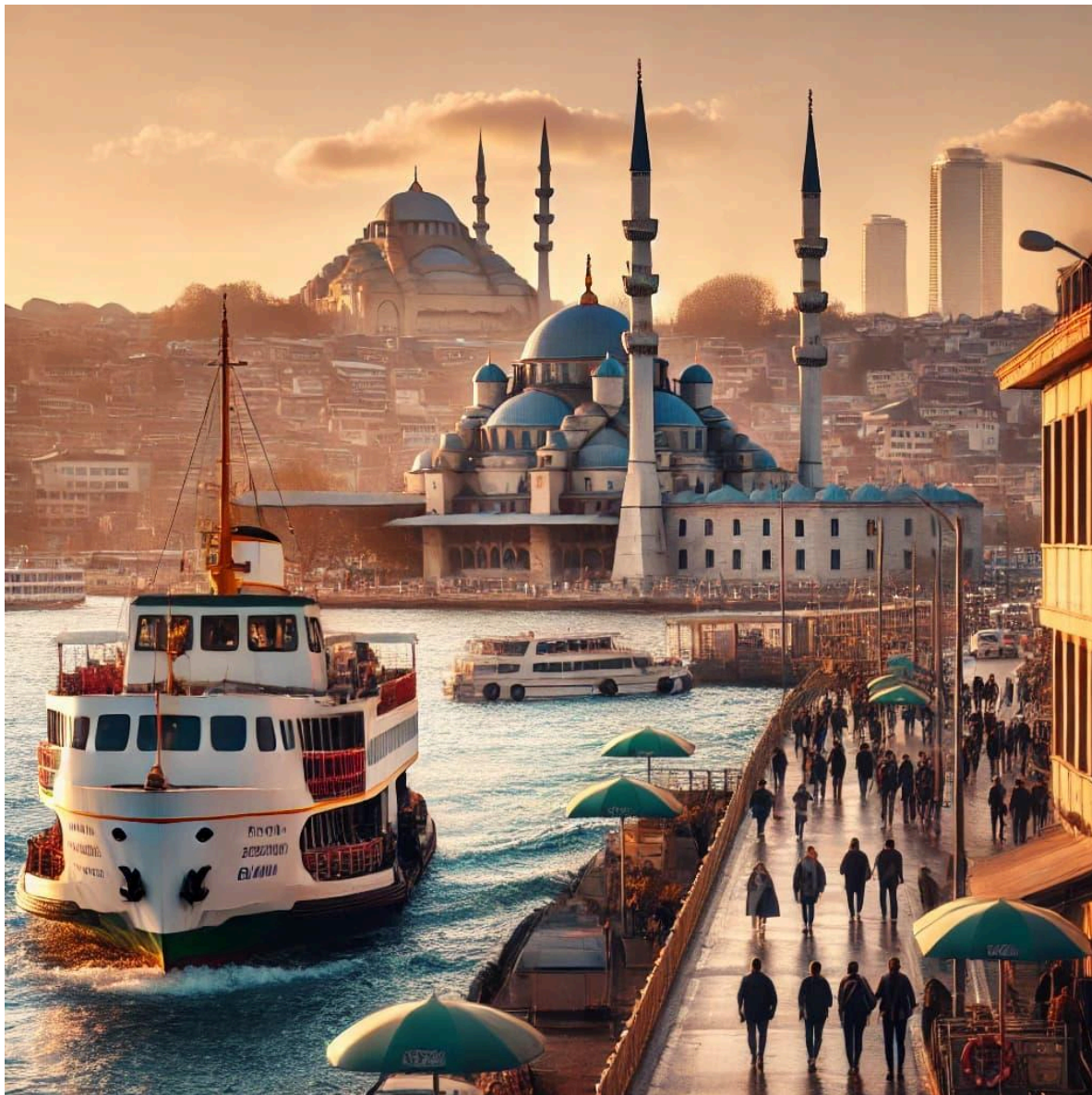

Echoes of Empire: Tracing Faith Through Time

Paragraph 1

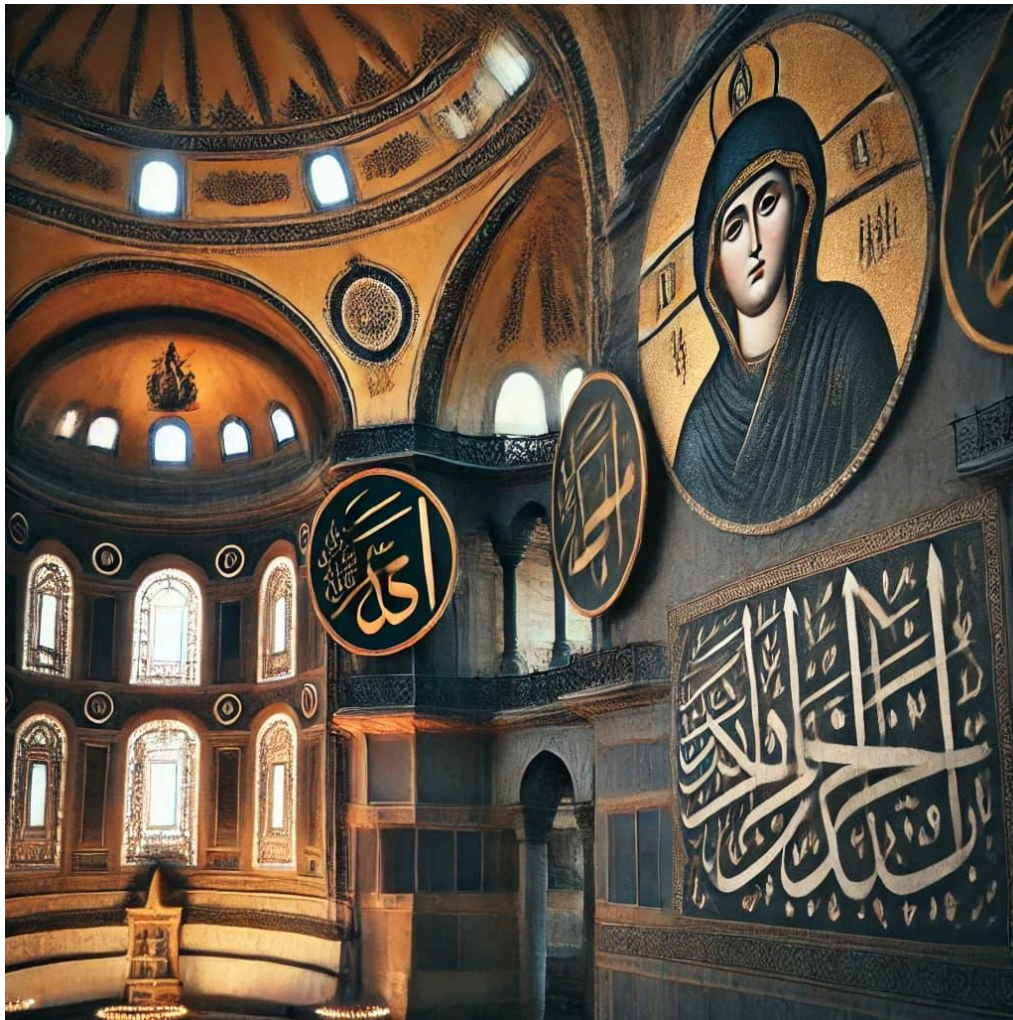
Istanbul is often seen as the heart of cultural convergence—a city where continents, religions, and empires have collided and coexisted. Standing at the edge of Europe and Asia, it has absorbed and reflected the identities of many civilizations throughout history.



[photo01] *Cityscape of Istanbul showing both European and Asian sides across the Bosphorus*

Paragraph 2

One of the most prominent legacies of this convergence lies in religion. Istanbul is home to majestic mosques and ancient churches that share the skyline. Structures like the Hagia Sophia reflect transitions not just in architecture, but in belief systems—shifting from Orthodox Christianity to Islam and now existing as a hybrid cultural symbol.



[photo02] *Interior of the Hagia Sophia, with Christian mosaics and Islamic calligraphy side by side*

Paragraph 3

Such spaces show us the power of belief to shape cities. In the early days of Christianity, however, the region was not so tolerant. Roman emperors saw Christians as a threat, leading to widespread persecution. But the tides would change with the emergence of a figure whose decisions altered the spiritual path of an empire.



[photo03] *Illustration of Roman persecution of early Christians*

Paragraph 4

As the Roman Empire grew unstable in the West, its attention turned eastward. The foundation of a new imperial center—later called Constantinople—would become a strategic and symbolic gesture. But who was the visionary behind this transformation? His roots trace back to a lesser-known place, far from the grandeur of Istanbul.



[photo04] *Ancient Roman ruins in a Balkan landscape*

Paragraph 5

Emperor Constantine the Great—the first Roman emperor to legalize Christianity through the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. He would go on to establish Constantinople as the new capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. His legacy shaped both religious freedom and the geopolitical focus of the empire for centuries to come.



[photo05] *Statue of Constantine the Great with a Christian cross in hand*

Paragraph 6

What many don't realize is that Constantine was born in a modest Roman city known then as Naissus. Today, this city is called Niš, located in the southern region of Serbia. Though quieter and less visited than Istanbul, its older neighborhoods, such as Majakovskog, still carry the charm of everyday life—small houses, tree-lined streets, and a local pace untouched by mass tourism. Niš holds deep historical significance as the birthplace of one of history's most transformative rulers.



[photo06] *A peaceful street in modern-day Niš, Serbia*

Paragraph 7

Naissus was a military hub in the Roman era, sitting at a vital crossroad of the Balkans. Its strategic location helped shape Constantine's worldview and his rise through the imperial ranks. The city still bears traces of Roman heritage: remnants of baths, amphitheaters, and mosaics hidden beneath modern life.



[photo07] *Underground Roman mosaic discovered in Niš*

Paragraph 8

Today, Istanbul and Niš are connected not just by geography but by the threads of imperial legacy, spiritual transformation, and cultural resilience. From the domes of Hagia Sophia to the stone paths of Niš's fortresses, the echoes of empire still speak to those who listen closely.



[photo08] *Split image: Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and ancient fortress ruins in Niš*

Vocabulary List

- **Convergence:** Coming together from different directions
 - **Legacy:** Something handed down from the past
 - **Orthodox Christianity:** One of the earliest forms of Christianity
 - **Edict of Milan:** The proclamation that legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire
 - **Resilience:** The ability to recover or adapt after difficulties
 - **Persecution:** Hostile treatment due to religious beliefs
 - **Balkans:** The geographical region in southeastern Europe
 - **Fortress:** A stronghold used for defense
 - **Hybrid:** A mix or combination of different elements
 - **Symbolic gesture:** An action that carries deep meaning beyond its appearance
-

Comparison Table: Istanbul vs Niš

| Aspect | Istanbul | Niš (Naissus) |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Historical Role | Capital of Byzantine Empire | Birthplace of Constantine the Great |
| Geopolitical Location | Straddles Europe and Asia | Key crossroad in the Balkans |
| Religious Significance | Center of Christian-Islamic transition | Early influence in Christian imperial policy |
| Modern Character | Global metropolis | Quiet Balkan city with Roman heritage |

Day 1 Questions

1. Why is Istanbul often described as a cultural crossroads?
2. What religious transitions has the Hagia Sophia undergone?
3. What challenges did early Christians face in the Roman Empire?
4. What strategic role did Constantinople serve in the Eastern Roman Empire?
5. Fill in the blank: Constantine was born in a Roman city known as _____.

Day 2 Questions

Fill in the Gaps

1. The _____ of Milan legalized Christianity across the Roman Empire.
 2. _____ is the modern name for the ancient city of Naissus.
 3. Constantine the Great was the first Roman emperor to support _____.
 4. Istanbul lies between _____ and _____ continents.
 5. The region of the _____ was crucial in ancient Roman military strategy.
-

Matching (write the number of the correct answer next to each letter):

Items:

- A. Constantine the Great
- B. Hagia Sophia
- C. Edict of Milan
- D. Niš
- E. Byzantine Empire

Descriptions:

1. A city in Serbia with Roman origins
 2. Eastern continuation of the Roman Empire
 3. Roman emperor who legalized Christianity
 4. A proclamation allowing religious freedom
 5. A famous religious structure in Istanbul
-

Discussion Prompts

1. How did Constantine's policies change the direction of the Roman Empire?
 2. In what ways are Istanbul and Niš both crossroads of history?
 3. Do you think architecture can reflect religious or political shifts? Why or why not?
 4. Why might Niš be less known than Istanbul despite its historical importance?
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Column: A Tale of Two Cities — Istanbul and Niš

At first glance, Istanbul and Niš may seem worlds apart—one a global metropolis bridging two continents, the other a quiet Balkan city nestled between hills. But look closer, and surprising similarities emerge.

Both cities are shaped by the flow of water: Istanbul by the mighty Bosphorus, and Niš by the Nišava River. Their skylines, scattered with red-tiled roofs, reflect layers of history—Byzantine, Roman, Ottoman. In each, bridges connect more than just streets; they link cultural eras and imperial legacies.

While Istanbul is known as the crossroads of continents, Niš has long been a crossroads of empires. And in both places, if you listen carefully, the echoes of ancient footsteps still linger in the stone.

In Serbian, Niš was once called *Vilin grad*—“the City of Fairies.” Though the name has faded from official maps, many locals still carry it in memory, as something gentle, timeless, and more poetic than the modern-sounding “Niš.”