Modern buildings in Istanbul, Turkey, encircle the ancient Hagia Sophia, which was built during the Byzantine Empire.

Meryem lives in Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey. It is early morning, and she is riding a ferryboat to get to work. The crowded ferry carries passengers across the Bosporus Strait, the narrow waterway that connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.

Looking ahead to the west, Meryem sees the domes and spires of Istanbul’s ancient mosques. The city’s business district stands among these old landmarks. Behind her, to the east, the sun is rising over the high-rise apartment building where she lives.

Every day, thousands of Turks like Meryem commute back and forth across the Bosporus Strait. In the morning, they leave their homes in Asia for their jobs in Europe. At night, they return to Asia. In the course of their commute, they never leave Istanbul. This is because the city spans two continents: the eastern section of Istanbul lies in Asia, while the western portion is located in Europe.

Istanbul’s unique location has helped to boost its population to nearly triple that of the next largest city in Turkey. Many other countries also have a dominant city that is by far their largest and most important one. Geographers have a name for such an urban area: they call it a primate city. The word primate means “highest ranking.”

In this lesson, you will read about the traits of primate cities. You will also discover how geography, history, and culture have come together to make Istanbul a primate city.
**The Site of Constantinople**
This illustration from the 1400s shows the site of Constantinople. The city is located on the tip of a peninsula. This location made it easy to wall off the city for protection from invasion by land. In times of danger, the city also put a chain across the Bosporus Strait. The chain helped protect against invasion by sea.

**1. The Geographic Setting**
Founded more than 2,500 years ago, the city now called Istanbul has been known by three different names during the course of its long history. The ancient Greeks who first settled there called the city Byzantium. The Romans changed its name to Constantinople, and the Turks later renamed the city Istanbul. Under each name, the city has thrived as a center of trade, government, and culture. Throughout much of its history, it was also a primate city.

**Istanbul’s Favorable Site and Situation**
The city has survived for so long because of its favorable location. Geographers describe a place’s location in two ways. First, they look at a place’s **site**, or its physical characteristics. Second, they look at its **situation**, which is the position of a place in relation to its surrounding area.

The site of this city was well chosen—it was built at the tip of a **peninsula** with a natural harbor. Having water on three sides helped to protect the city from overland attack. And the peninsula is flat, fertile, and well-watered, which makes it productive for farming.

The city’s situation was equally well chosen. The city was built on the Bosporus Strait.
Strait, a narrow waterway that links the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. The strait is part of a waterway that flows from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. The Bosporus Strait also marks the dividing line between Europe and Asia. In ancient times, trade routes from three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—met at this point, with trade goods flowing into the city from as far as China, Russia, and East Africa.

**The Capital of Three Empires** The Greeks were the first to appreciate Istanbul's location, but they would not be the last. Over time, the city would serve as the capital of three great empires.

Byzantium became part of the Roman Empire in 196 C.E. Almost four centuries later, the Roman emperor Constantine moved his government there, and in 330 C.E., he made Byzantium the new **capital city** of the Roman Empire. A capital city is the center of government for a state, country, or empire. The new capital was renamed Constantinople after the emperor.

The western part of the Roman Empire fell in the late 400s, but the eastern part survived, becoming the Byzantine Empire. This empire grew to include much of Southwest Asia and parts of Eastern Europe. The Byzantine Empire lasted for the next 1,000 years, with Constantinople as its capital. During this time, the city’s wealth attracted invaders, but the strong city walls held them back.

By 1300, a group of Turks called the Ottomans began to conquer Southwest Asia. In 1453, the Ottomans took over Constantinople as well. They renamed the city Istanbul and made it the capital of their growing Ottoman Empire.

In 1922, the Ottoman Empire fell apart. Istanbul became part of the modern country of Turkey in 1923, but it did not become Turkey’s capital city. That honor went to the smaller city of Ankara. Even so, Istanbul remains one of the world’s great primate cities.

▶ Geoterms

**capital city** a city that is the governmental center of a country or region. Sometimes a capital city is also a primate city.

**primate city** the largest and most important city in a country. A primate city has at least twice the population of the next largest city. It is a center of economic power and national culture.

**site** the specific place where something is located, including its physical setting

**situation** the way a place is positioned in relation to its wider surroundings
The Situation of Constantinople
Constantinople was situated between Asia and Europe. Trade goods came from Asia by land and by sea. Other goods came from Africa and Europe. By 1000 B.C.E., trade had helped elevate Constantinople to one of the world’s largest cities.

Istanbul’s Site and Situation
Istanbul has outgrown its original peninsula site. Its situation, however, remains the same. The city has access by water to two seas, and it is surrounded by fertile farmland. These factors contributed to its becoming a primate city.
2. A Country’s Largest City by Far

Mustafa moved to Istanbul to make money so that he could afford to marry his girlfriend. He is a barber and works in the heart of the city. Before moving to Istanbul, Mustafa lived in a small town where he knew everyone. Now, he walks among crowds of strangers in Istanbul. Mustafa’s story is similar to the experiences of countless people living in this busy primate city.

At the Top of the Urban Hierarchy Primate cities are located at the top of the urban hierarchy. A hierarchy is a ranking system, and an urban hierarchy ranks cities according to their size and the services they offer. A primate city is by far a country’s highest-ranking city in terms of size, having at least twice as many people as the next largest city. A primate city also ranks first in terms of other attractive cultural factors, from schools and jobs to shopping and sports.

Istanbul is Turkey’s largest city by a wide margin. In 2015, about 14 million people lived there. By comparison, Turkey’s second largest urban area, the capital city of Ankara, had only 4.7 million people. Istanbul is so large that one out of every five Turks lives there.

The Urban Hierarchy
This diagram shows the ranking of urban places in terms of size and importance. Primate cities stand at the top of the urban hierarchy. A primate city has at least twice as many people as any other city in that country. People are drawn to primate cities because they provide more opportunities than smaller areas.

Drawing Migrants from Rural Villages Primate cities act like magnets, attracting and pulling people from many of the surrounding towns and villages. Each year, more than 400,000 people relocate to Istanbul. Like Mustafa, many of these newcomers leave rural villages in search of work, education, and excitement in the big city.

This rural-to-urban migration can cause problems, as some primate cities are growing too fast to meet the needs of their residents. Many of Istanbul’s new arrivals, for example, are unable to find affordable housing. For a time, they built temporary shelters on open land on the city’s
outskirts. Turks call these shantytowns *gecekondus*, a Turkish word that means “built overnight.” These neighborhoods sometimes lack such basic services as running water, electricity, and garbage collection. Regulations have been imposed in recent years to halt gecekondu construction. Now, existing gecekondu neighborhoods are being transformed into mass housing units and apartment blocks.

Additionally, Istanbul suffers from heavy traffic and air pollution. Sewage has dirtied the city’s waterways, and many homes have poor plumbing. The city has attempted to address these problems by introducing initiatives to pedestrianize the city, but the impact of these efforts are currently unclear. Still, people continue to migrate to Istanbul, and the city remains at the top of Turkey’s urban hierarchy.

3. A Center of Economic Power

Large ships rest in Istanbul’s harbor, holding huge containers that are filled with goods either entering or leaving Turkey. All day long, gigantic cranes lift the containers and place them on ship decks or truck beds. For many centuries, Istanbul has been characterized by the domes of its many mosques. Today, the cranes also symbolize this bustling city.

**A Hub of Business, Trade, and Travel** Istanbul is the economic center of Turkey, comprising almost half of the country’s industrial production and jobs. Nearly half of all goods bought and sold in Turkey pass through the city, and it is also Turkey’s banking center.

Istanbul’s busy port welcomes ships from all over the world. Ships arrive carrying machinery, oil, metals, medicines, plastics, and chemicals, and leave with textiles, clothing, steel products, foods, and minerals.

The city connects Turkey to the rest of the world, and has been a railroad center since the early days of train travel. Rail passengers took the famous Orient Express from Paris to Istanbul, and from there they boarded the Baghdad Railway to travel into Southwest Asia. Modern visitors arrive by air and ship as well. Most people who travel to Turkey start or end their visit in Istanbul.

**No Longer the Capital City** Many primate cities are also capital cities. Government buildings and offices are housed there, and legislatures assemble in these cities to make laws.

As you have read, Istanbul was once both a primate city and a capital city. However, it lost its place as a capital city in 1923, when the Republic of Turkey was formed. The president of the new country, Kemal Ataturk, wanted Turkey to have a capital that had not been the center of ancient empires. By choosing Ankara as the capital city, he hoped to show the world that Turkey was very modern. Still, Istanbul remains Turkey’s primate city.
Ships on the Bosporus Strait

Every year, tens of thousands of ships move through Turkey’s Bosporus Strait. All of this shipping makes the Bosporus the world’s most crowded waterway. Its narrow passages and tricky turns also make it one of the most dangerous.

4. A Center of National Life and Culture

Every day, almost 500,000 people shop in Istanbul’s Grand Bazaar. A bazaar is somewhat like a shopping mall. Instead of stores, however, a bazaar has stalls, and instead of hired salespeople, it has traders who sell their goods. With more than 60 streets and over 4,000 shops—all under one roof—the Grand Bazaar is one of the many attractions drawing people to this primate city.

The Grand Bazaar: A Reflection of Turkish Culture

There are no price tags at the Grand Bazaar. Instead, buyers bargain with sellers. For example, sellers may name a price that is ten times what the object is worth. Buyers may counter with a price that is one-tenth what the item is worth, and so the haggling begins.

Travelers from all over Turkey and from around the world come to explore the Grand Bazaar, where they can shop for a variety of pottery, jewelry, metalwork, and other items that reflect Turkey’s culture. Buyers can also browse Turkey’s famous carpets. Carpet weaving is an ancient and honored art throughout Turkey, with each village boasting its own traditional designs.
Istanbul’s Grand Bazaar The Grand Bazaar reflects Turkish culture in its displays of art and other goods. Its stalls present a colorful mix of rugs, pottery, jewelry, and clothing. There are workshops where skilled workers beat copper, brass, and silver into useful objects. This craft has been passed down from one generation to the next for hundreds of years.

A Cultural and Sports Center Although Istanbul is not Turkey’s capital city, it is still the country’s cultural and sports center. The most important Turkish museums are found in this primate city, along with art galleries and concert halls. Musical events range from opera to jazz and rock concerts. Nightclubs offer more traditional entertainment such as Turkish songs and dances.

The area of modern-day Istanbul has been a sports center for approximately 2,000 years. In fact, visitors can still view the ruins of the Hippodrome, an ancient Roman sports stadium that could hold over 60,000 people. Romans gathered in the Hippodrome for horse racing, chariot racing, and other athletic events. Turks still gather in Istanbul’s sports stadiums, but today they come to watch soccer.

A Gold Rush, Miners, and Tourists The city draws tourists from all over the world. Its historic structures are cultural symbols of Turkey as well as tourist attractions.

One of the most visited historic buildings is the beautiful Hagia Sophia. Its name means “Holy Wisdom.” The Byzantines built Hagia Sophia as a Christian church in the 500s c.e. In the 1400s, the Ottomans turned the building into an Islamic mosque. Today the Hagia Sophia is a museum that reminds visitors of how long Istanbul has been a major meeting place of many cultures and peoples. The city’s history includes both Christian and Muslim ways of life.

The Topkapi Palace has become a lasting symbol of Turkey’s Ottoman heritage. The palace is a sprawling mix of buildings and gardens and was once home to the rulers of the Ottoman Empire. Visitors can see great wealth on display at Topkapi, including one famous object known as the Topkapi dagger. Made during the 1700s, it is a sword covered with diamonds and emeralds.

The Blue Mosque is another key symbol of Turkey’s Ottoman past. This mosque is named after the 20,000 blue tiles that line its inside walls. Built during the 1600s, it is famous for its many domes and minarets. A minaret is a tall, slender tower that is attached to a mosque.
Hagia Sophia, “Holy Wisdom”
This immense church was built within five years. When it was completed in 537 C.E., a writer described its impact on visitors: “No one ever became weary of this spectacle, but those who are in the church delight in what they see.” Today, it reminds visitors that Istanbul has long been a meeting place of religions and cultures.

No visit to Istanbul would be complete without a trip to one of the city’s famous public baths, called hamam. Turks go to these baths to wash, have massages, and visit with friends. Some of the baths date back more than 500 years. In this ancient primate city, however, that is not considered very old.

Summary
In this lesson, you have learned that Istanbul is a primate city. It has more than twice the population of the next largest city in Turkey. It is also the country’s business and cultural center. Its site and situation have attracted people for more than 2,500 years. Today, Ankara is Turkey’s capital city, but Istanbul still stands out as the country’s largest and most important city.

In addition to Turkey, other countries have primate cities as well. France is one example of a country with a primate city. Its capital city, Paris, has more than twice the number of people as the next largest city in France, which is Lyon. Paris is also France’s economic and cultural center. Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, is another primate city. Bangkok draws people and resources from throughout the country. In contrast, China and Canada are two countries that do not have a primate city. That is, these two countries do not have one city that stands out as the center of the country’s population, economic power, and culture.

Primate cities are like magnets, attracting people, trade, culture, and ideas. Think about this as you examine the map of primate cities around the world in the next section.