

The Byzantine Empire and Russia

GEOGRAPHY

As the Western half of the Roman Empire fell in 476 C.E., the Eastern part of the empire, the Byzantine Empire, was flourishing. The Byzantine Empire was successful for three main reasons.

1. Many of the rich aristocrats and merchants left Rome with their wealth intact, heading to Constantinople.
2. Constantinople was located on the shores of the Bosphorus, a body of water that links the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Since the city was surrounded by mountains on three sides, it could only be attacked from the water, which was very heavily guarded and very safe.
3. The Byzantine Empire had access to the trade routes coming to Europe from Asia: The Silk Road from China, the Spice Route from India, wheat from Egypt, and even enslaved people and ironwork from Western Europe. Its geographical location allowed it to have access to money and trade that was not disrupted by the barbarian invasions in Western Europe.

The Byzantine Empire experienced a quick rise to a golden age as it continued the Hellenistic blending of Greek, Roman, Asian, and even Christian culture. Eventually, the empire entered a period of slow, steady decline ending in the 1400s.

EMPEROR JUSTINIAN

Justinian was the greatest Byzantine emperor. He reigned during its golden age from 527 C.E. to 565 C.E. Justinian tried to reconquer the Western half of the empire, but he was not successful. The attempt drained his treasury and nearly bankrupted him.

The power behind Justinian was his wife, Theodora, a former peasant. Theodora was not simply his wife. She was also a political advisor and backed him up during a revolt in the city of Constantinople. Justinian's advisors told him to flee, but it was Theodora who convinced her husband to stay. Her disdain for the rebellion was obvious, and Justinian brutally subjugated the members of the rebellion, in large part due to his wife.

Theodora turned out to be quite a politician. She was strong enough at times to challenge her husband's authority, and she made her own decisions in an era when women did not have a lot of power. Theodora proved to be an excellent diplomat, negotiating with the Persian Empire. She was quick to give humanitarian aid to areas that needed help, and she helped build hospitals. Theodora advocated for the rights of women.

Corpus Juris Civilis

During his reign, Emperor Justinian decided to revise the confusing Roman legal code system. In 529 C.E., he created what is known as the body of civil law: the Corpus Juris Civilis. He put together a Byzantine assembly to study the laws of the Roman assembly to find out what worked and what did not, what was contradictory and what was redundant, and then he streamlined it. The Corpus Juris Civilis had a big impact on the church and Western European government. Medieval monarchs during the nation-building period of European history modeled their laws on its principles.

Justinian's Power

Emperor Justinian wanted to use the Corpus Juris Civilis as a tool to unite his empire. He was the sole ruler with complete authority, like the Roman emperors of old. He maintained a large bureaucracy to help carry out his government, and it was fairly efficient. Justinian even enjoyed one other facet of power that was not present in the West: he had power over the Eastern Orthodox Church. He was seen as the co-ruler with Christ on the Earth, so the Byzantine Empire had a deeply intertwined church and state, whereas church and state were staunchly and fiercely separated in the West. In the Byzantine Empire, there was one God and one religion.

EASTERN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

The Eastern Orthodox Church differed from the Roman Catholic Church in many ways.

1. Church leadership. In the Byzantine Empire, the emperor was the head of the church. He oversaw and controlled church affairs. The emperor appointed a patriarch, who was the head official of the church, like a cardinal or an archbishop. The patriarch was subservient to the emperor, just as a cardinal or archbishop was subservient to the pope in the Roman Catholic Church.
2. Church control over lives of Christians. Roman Catholics believed that the pope controlled the lives of all Christians, which is opposite of Eastern Orthodox Christians.
3. Marriage of priests. Eastern Orthodox priests could marry and have families, but monks and bishops could not.
4. Bread for communion. Roman Catholics could not use leavened bread for communion, but Eastern Orthodox Christians could.
5. Religious icons. Perhaps the biggest difference was the dispute over the use of religious icons or holy images, statues, pictures, paintings, or stained-glass images of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and other saints. Byzantine Emperor Leo III outlawed the practice of using religious icons.

THE GREAT SCHISM

The Great Schism of 1054 C.E. occurred because of the different ways that Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians used religion icons. When Byzantine Emperor Leo III outlawed the practice of using religious icons, the Pope excommunicated the Emperor. This caused much anger, and Emperor Leo III excommunicated the Pope. This led to a permanent split between the two Christian churches, known as the Great Schism. The Great Schism started the collapse of the Byzantine Empire.

THE FIRST CRUSADE

After the Great Schism of 1054, the Byzantine Empire began struggling for many reasons:

- A series of weak emperors took control
- Continued religious differences with Western Europe
- Conflicts with the Sassanid Empire of Asia
- Fear of the growing Islamic expansion

In 1090 C.E., Byzantine Emperor Comnenus had to ask the pope in Rome for assistance. In asking for help, the Byzantine emperor recognized the pope's authority. In return, Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade in 1092 C.E. with the hope of reunifying the church, and Pope Urban II was officially recognized by the Byzantine Empire.

However, the First Crusade had negative effects on the Byzantine Empire as well. It created a trade rivalry with Italian cities. Italy began to capitalize on merchant trade, further draining money from the Byzantine Empire. In 1453 C.E., the Ottoman Empire captured the city of Constantinople. The emperor was given a chance to leave, but he chose to continue the fight and was killed, leading to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire.

The Ottoman ruler, Mehmed II, entered Constantinople and renamed it Istanbul, which is the name of the city to this day.

FUN FACT

Mehmed II also converted the large Eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople into an Islamic mosque, the Hagia Sophia. It is one of the icons of the city today showing the blending of architectural and religious styles.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

The Byzantine Empire was built upon Hellenistic ideas. The empire made advancements in art, especially with mosaic work. They made further use of the Roman arch and the dome. Byzantine artwork made the Bible come to life in picture form. They began to use pillars and other types of architecture that blended the Greek, Roman, Persian, Arabic, and Egyptian building styles started by Alexander the Great. And most importantly, as the Western European world collapsed into the Dark Ages, Byzantine scholars preserved classical works of learning. They preserved everything from the current learning all the way back to ancient Greece.

Constantinople was a repository of culture and learning, and after the Ottoman Empire conquered the Byzantine Empire in 1453 C.E., many of the scholars and teachers in Constantinople traveled back to Western Europe. This began the reeducation and cultural flowering of the Western European people, ushering in what is now called the Renaissance.

