

# Byzantine Empire Summary

The Western Roman Empire crumbled in the fifth century as it was overrun by invading Germanic tribes. By this time, however, the once great empire had already undergone significant changes. It had been divided into western and eastern empires, and its capital had moved east from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium. The city would become known as Constantinople after the emperor Constantine, who made it the new capital in 330 CE. (Byzantium would remain as the name of the entire Eastern Empire.) For nearly a thousand years after the collapse of the Western Empire, Byzantium and its flourishing capital would carry on the glory of Rome.

## A New Rome in a New Setting

Roman leaders had divided the empire in 395, largely due to difficulties in communications between the eastern and the troubled western parts of the empire. Still, rulers in the East continued to see themselves as emperors for all of Rome. In 527 Emperor Justinian, in an effort to regain Rome's fading glory, successfully sent his forces to recover lost territory. Justinian now ruled almost all the territory that Rome had ever ruled. He could honestly call himself a new Caesar. Like the last of the old Caesars, the Byzantine emperors ruled with absolute power. They headed not just the state but the church as well. They appointed and dismissed bishops at will. Their politics were brutal—and often deadly. Emperors lived under constant risk of assassination.

## Life in the New Rome

A separate government and difficult communications with the West gave the Byzantine Empire its own character, different from that of the Western Empire. The citizens thought of themselves as sharing in the Roman tradition, but few spoke Latin anymore. Most Byzantines spoke Greek.

Having unified the two empires, Justinian set up a panel of legal experts to regulate Byzantium's increasingly complex society. The panel combed through 400 years of Roman law. It found a number of laws that were outdated and contradictory. The panel created a single, uniform code known as the Justinian Code. The Justinian Code decided legal questions that regulated whole areas of Byzantine life. Marriage, slavery, property, inheritance, women's rights, and criminal justice were just some of those areas. His code served the Byzantine Empire for 900 years.

While his scholars were creating the legal code, Justinian launched the most ambitious public building program ever seen in the Roman world. He rebuilt the crumbling fortifications of Constantinople, as workers constructed a 14-mile stone wall along the city's coastline and repaired the massive fortifications along its western land border.

Church building, however, was the emperor's greatest passion. Justinian viewed churches as the most visible sign of the close connection between church and state in his empire. The crowning glory of his reign was Hagia Sophia (HAY•ee•uh soh•FEE•uh), which means "Holy Wisdom" in Greek. When Justinian built Hagia Sophia, many visitors hailed it as the most splendid church in the Christian world.

As part of his building program, Justinian enlarged his palace into a vast complex. He also built baths, aqueducts, law courts, schools, and hospitals. By the time the emperor was finished, the city teemed with an almost visible excitement. Beneath such excitement, a less obvious but vitally important activity took place: the preservation of Greco-Roman culture. Byzantine families valued education—specifically classical learning. Basic courses for Byzantine students focused on Greek and Latin grammar, and philosophy. The classics of Greek and Roman literature served as textbooks. The modern world owes Byzantine scholars a huge debt for preserving many of the great works of Greece and Rome.

The main street running through Constantinople was the Mese or "Middle Way." Merchant stalls lined the main street and filled the side streets. Products from the most distant corners of Asia, Africa, and Europe passed through these stalls. Everywhere, food stands filled the air with the smell of their delicacies, while acrobats and street musicians performed. Meanwhile, citizens could enjoy free entertainment at the Hippodrome, which offered wild chariot races and performance acts. The Hippodrome held 60,000 spectators. Fans of the different teams formed rowdy gangs named for the colors worn by their heroes.

## The Empire Falls



After Justinian's death in 565, the empire suffered countless setbacks. There were street riots, religious quarrels, palace intrigues, and foreign dangers. Each time the empire moved to the edge of collapse, it found some way to revive—only to face another crisis. From the very start of its rise to power, Byzantium faced constant challenges from foreign enemies. With the rise of Islam, Arab armies attacked the city in 674 and once again in 717. Russians attempted invasions of the city three times between 860 and 1043. In the 11th century, the Turks took over the Muslim world and fought their way slowly into Byzantine territory.

All of these attacks were unsuccessful thanks to the city's location by the sea, its naval fleet, and the secret weapon of Greek Fire (a highly inflammable liquid), and, most importantly of all, the protection of the massive Theodosian Walls.

The city's celebrated walls were a triple row of fortifications built during the reign of Theodosius II (408-450 CE) which protected the land side of the peninsula occupied by the city. They extended across the peninsula from the shores of the Sea of Marmara to the Golden Horn, eventually being fully completed in 439 CE. Attackers first faced a ditch which could be flooded with water fed from pipes when required. Behind that was an outer wall which had a patrol track to oversee the moat. Behind this was a second wall which had regular towers and an interior terrace so as to provide a firing platform to shoot down on any enemy forces attacking the moat and first wall. Then, behind that wall was a third, much more massive, inner wall. This final defense presented to the enemy 96 projecting towers. The towers, either square or octagonal in form, could hold up to three artillery machines. To take Constantinople, an army would, then, need to attack by both land and sea, but all attempts failed no matter who tried and no matter what weapons and siege engines they launched at the city.

The Byzantines used bribes, diplomacy, political marriages, and military power to keep their enemies at bay. In the seventh century, Emperor Heraclius reorganized the empire along military lines. Provinces became themes, or military districts. Each theme was run by a general who reported directly to the emperor. These strategies, however, could not work forever.

Slowly, the Byzantine Empire shrank under the impact of foreign attacks. By 1350, it was reduced to the tip of Anatolia and a strip of the Balkans. Yet thanks to its walls, its fleet, and its strategic location, Constantinople held out for another 100 years. Finally, the city fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. By this point, the Byzantine defending army was composed of fewer than 5,000 men, not a sufficient number to adequately cover the length of the city's walls, some 19 km in total. Worse still, the once great Byzantine navy now consisted of a mere 26 ships, and most of those belonged to the Italian colonists of the city. The Byzantines were hopelessly outnumbered in men, ships, and weapons.

### **The Church Divides**

During the Byzantine Empire, Christianity underwent a dramatic development. Christianity had begun to develop differently in the Western and Eastern Roman Empires, due largely to the distance and lack of contact between the two regions. As the Eastern Empire became Byzantium and flourished, those differences grew and ultimately split apart the Church. Eastern Christianity built its heritage on the works of early Church fathers. One was Saint Basil, who, around 357, wrote rules for the life of monks.

Differences between the Eastern and Western churches, continued to grow. In 1054, matters came to a head when the pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other in a dispute over religious doctrine. Shortly afterward, Christianity officially split between the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East [this is referred to as the Schism "split"].

### **Byzantine Missionaries Convert the Slavs**

As West and East grew apart, the two traditions of Christianity competed for converts. Missionaries from the Orthodox Church, for example, took their form of Christianity to the Slavs, groups that inhabited the forests north of the Black Sea. Two of the most successful Eastern missionaries, Saint Methodius and Saint Cyril (SEER•uhl), worked among the Slavs in the ninth century. Cyril and Methodius invented an alphabet for the Slavic languages.

With an alphabet, Slavs would be able to read the Bible in their own tongues. Many Slavic languages, including Russian, are now written in what is called the Cyrillic (suh•RIHL•ihk) alphabet. As these missionaries carried out their work, the Slavs themselves were creating a culture that would form one of history's most influential countries: Russia.

