

The Byzantine Empire
World History
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In 330 CE, the first Christian ruler of the Roman empire, Constantine the Great (r. 306–337) transferred the ancient imperial capital from Rome to the city of Byzantium located on the easternmost territory of the European continent, at a major intersection of east-west trade. The emperor renamed this ancient port city Constantinople ("the city of Constantine") in his own honor; it was also called the "New Rome," owing to the city's new status as political capital of the Roman Empire. This Christian and ultimately Greek-speaking state ruled from a city that would come to be called Byzantium by modern historians, although the empire's medieval citizens described themselves as "*Rhomaioi*," Romans, and considered themselves the inheritors of the ancient Roman Empire. The emperor renamed this ancient port city Constantinople ("the city of Constantine") in his own honor.

In 527, a high-ranking Byzantine nobleman named Justinian succeeded his uncle to the throne of the Eastern Empire. In an effort to regain Rome's fading glory, Justinian in 533 sent his best general, Belisarius to recover North Africa from the invading Germanic tribes. Belisarius and his forces quickly succeeded. Two years later, Belisarius attacked Rome and seized it from a group known as the Ostrogoths. But the city faced repeated attacks by other Germanic tribes. Over the next 16 years, Rome changed hands six times. After numerous campaigns, Justinian's armies won nearly all of Italy and parts of Spain. 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. Of the 88 Byzantine emperors, 29 died violently, and 13 abandoned the throne to live in monasteries.

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. Although Justinian himself died in 565, 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, which means "Holy Wisdom" in Greek. A church of the same name had been destroyed

in riots that swept Constantinople in 532. When Justinian rebuilt 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. Students memorized Homer. They learned geometry from Euclid, history from Herodotus, and medicine from Galen. 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 (from Greek words meaning “horse” and “racecourse”) held 60,000 spectators. Fans of the different teams formed rowdy gangs named for the colors worn by their heroes. In 532, two such fan groups sparked citywide riots called the Nika Rebellion (because the mob cried “Nika!” or “Victory!”). Both sides were angry with the government. They felt that city officials had been too severe in putting down a previous riot of Hippodrome fans. They packed the Hippodrome and demanded the overthrow of Justinian. Belisarius, however, broke in with his troops and slaughtered about 30,000 rebels. Justinian had considered fleeing during the Nika Rebellion, but his wife, Theodora, urged him to stay. As her husband’s steely adviser, Theodora had immense power.

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. A controversy that tested the emperor’s authority over religious matters broke out in the eighth century. In 730, the Roman Catholic pope banned the use of icons, religious images used by Eastern Christians to aid their devotions. The pope viewed the use of icons as idol worship. Eastern Christians responded with riots, and the Byzantine clergy rebelled. Differences between the Eastern and Western churches, continued to grow. In 1054, matters came to a head when the pope and the patriarch (the leader of the Eastern Christians) 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 split is often called the Great Schism.

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. The first crisis actually began before Justinian’s death. It was a disease that resembled what we now know as the

bubonic plague. This horrifying illness hit Constantinople in the later years of Justinian's reign. The plague probably arrived from India on ships infested with rats. Historians estimate that in 542, the worst year of the plague, 10,000 people were dying every day. The illness broke out repeatedly until around 700, when it finally faded. By that time, it had destroyed a huge percentage of the Byzantine population.

From the very start of its rise to power, Byzantium faced constant challenges from foreign enemies. Lombards overran Justinian's conquests in the west. Avars, Slavs, and Bulgars made frequent raids on the northern borders. The powerful Sassanid Persians attacked relentlessly in the east. The Persians and Avars struck against Constantinople itself in 626. 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. 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 what is now Turkey 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.