

The Byzantine Empire
AP 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.

The first golden age of the empire, the Early Byzantine period, extends from the founding of the new capital into the 700s. Christianity replaced the gods of antiquity as the official religion of the culturally and religiously diverse state in the late 300s. Constantinople, like all great capitals, was a melting-pot of heterogeneous elements: all seventy-two languages known to man were represented in it, according to a contemporary source. Constantinople had been founded as a center of Latin culture in the east and still numbered among its residents many Illyrians, Italians and Africans whose native tongue was Latin as was that of the Emperor Justinian himself. Necessary as Latin still was for the legal profession and certain branches of the administration, the balance was inexorably tilting in favor of Greek.

In the Early Byzantine period, Byzantium's educated elite used Roman law, and Greek and Roman culture, to maintain a highly organized government centered on the court and its great cities. In later decades, urban decline and the invasions of the empire's western territories by Germanic tribes, especially in the fifth century, led to the diminishment of western centers including Rome, sacked in 410 by the Goths and in 455 by the Vandals. Despite the territorial gains of the emperor Justinian I in the sixth, many of the empire's Italian provinces were overtaken by Lombards in the late 500s. In the 600s, Persian and Arab invasions devastated much of Byzantium's eastern territories.

The Byzantine economy was among the most robust economies in the Mediterranean for many centuries. Constantinople was a prime hub in a trading network that at various times extended across nearly all of Eurasia and North Africa, as a connection between the Silk Roads, European trade networks, and African trade networks. Some scholars argue that, up until the arrival of the Arabs in the 7th century, the Empire had the most powerful economy in the world. The Arab conquests, however, would represent a substantial reversal of fortunes contributing to a period of decline and stagnation. Despite the decline, Constantinople remained the single most important commercial center of Europe for much of the Medieval era, which it held until the Republic of Venice slowly began to overtake Byzantine merchants in trade.

During the early Byzantine period, domed churches, the most important being Constantinople's Church of Hagia Sophia, and other domed sacred buildings began to appear in greater number

alongside traditional basilica forms, first seen in the large-scale churches sponsored by Emperor Constantine I in the early fourth century. The religion of the Byzantine Empire was called Eastern Orthodoxy instead of Catholicism. By Justinian's rule in the 500's, the Catholic Church, based in Rome, and the Orthodox Church, based in Constantinople, were practicing different faiths. While the two religions did not split officially until the "Great Schism" of 1054, in reality, they were separated much earlier. The Hagia Sophia was built both to promote Orthodoxy and to solidify Justinian's political power through monumental architecture. In order to promote the religion, Justinian and other Byzantine leaders also sent missionaries to other lands, hoping to unify their empire through a common religion. Eventually Orthodoxy spread to many parts of Eastern Europe and helped facilitate trade between those areas and the Byzantine Empire.

Justinian is also famous for creating a law code. It's said that Justinian looked at his empire and saw that the laws were a mess. Because they weren't written down, the laws in one part of the empire might be different than the laws in another part of the empire. Justinian wanted all of his people to be treated the same way, so Justinian had his judges and lawyers get together and write down all the laws of the land. They also wanted to write down the laws that began in ancient Rome, the laws called the Twelve Tables. Once they had written down all the laws and made sure that laws did not conflict with each other, they gave this body of law a name. They called it the Justinian Code. Many modern countries in the world have used the Justinian code as the basis for their own laws.

Despite the strength of the empire under Justinian, his rule was almost toppled during the Nika Riots or Nika Revolt of 531 C.E. Peasants were upset over high taxes and bureaucracy in Justinian's government and began revolting after a chariot racing event. While the Nika Riots did not topple Justinian's government, it did provide a warning for future emperors to try to avoid high taxation of their populations.

In 1204, armies of the Fourth Crusade invaded from western Europe, conquering the ancient Byzantine imperial capital and founding the "Latin Empire of Constantinople," while other imperial territories also fell to Crusader rule. The Crusader state in Constantinople was one of several in the thirteenth-century Levant, all under the spiritual authority of the pope as head of the Latin Church of Western Europe. This Crusader state lasted from 1204 until 1261, when Byzantine rule was reestablished in Constantinople and limited portions of the former Byzantine empire were also retaken.

While the political boundaries of Late Byzantium were drastically reduced from the expansive lands of the Early and Middle Byzantine periods, Byzantine religious influence still extended far beyond its borders. The focus of Byzantine power was now centered in Constantinople, and extended westward to Greece. The last Byzantine lands would be conquered by the Ottoman Turks in the mid-fifteenth century, with Constantinople taken in 1453, and Mistra and Trebizond in 1460. These Islamic conquests brought an end to an empire that endured more than 1,100 years after its first founding. Long after its fall, Byzantium set a standard for luxury, beauty, and learning that inspired the Latin West and the Islamic East.