



THE POSTCLASSICAL ERA, 500 TO 1000 C.E.

The postclassical era was a period of major readjustment for societies throughout the eastern hemisphere. The early centuries c.e. brought turbulence and instability to classical societies in China, India, southwest Asia, and the Mediterranean basin. Most of the classical empires collapsed under the strain of internal power struggles, external invasions, or a combination of the two. During the postclassical era the settled societies of the eastern hemisphere underwent political, social, economic, and cultural change that would shape their experiences over the long term. Indeed, the influence of the postclassical era continues to the present day.

The first task that settled societies faced in the postclassical era was the need to restore political and social order. They went about that task in very different ways. In the eastern Mediterranean the eastern half of the Roman empire survived as the Byzantine empire—the only empire that outlasted the difficulties of the late classical era—but underwent political and social reorganization in order to deal with external pressures. In southwest Asia, Arab conquerors inspired by the recently founded Islamic faith overcame the Sasanid empire of Persia. In China the Sui and Tang dynasties restored centralized imperial authority after almost four centuries of rule by competing regional kingdoms and nomadic conquerors. In India, in



contrast, centralized imperial rule did not return: authority devolved instead to a series of regional kingdoms, some of them quite large. In western Europe centralized imperial rule returned only for a brief moment during the eighth and ninth centuries under the Carolingian empire. Economic difficulties and new rounds of invasions, however, brought down the empire and encouraged devolution of authority to local rulers: the result was the development of a decentralized political order in western Europe. In different ways, then, all the settled societies of the eastern hemisphere embarked on a quest for political and social order during the centuries after the collapse of the classical empires.

The reestablishment of political and social order enabled postclassical societies to revive networks of long-distance trade and participate more actively in processes of cross-cultural communication and exchange. As a result, the postclassical era was a time of rapid economic growth in most of the eastern hemisphere. The volume of long-distance trade increased dramatically, and manufacturers began to produce goods explicitly for export rather than local consumption. Meanwhile, increased trade facilitated biological and technological as well as commercial exchanges: agricultural crops migrated far beyond the lands of their origin, and improved techniques of irrigation and cultivation spread through much of Eurasia. New crops and improved agricultural techniques led to en-

larged harvests and enriched diets particularly in China, India, and southwest Asia.

As agricultural production increased, so did human population. Growing numbers of people devoted their efforts to trade and manufacturing rather than cultivation. China, India, and the eastern Mediterranean region were especially prominent sites for the production of textiles, ceramics, and metal goods. Increased trade and manufacturing activity encouraged a remarkable round of technological invention and innovation. The magnetic compass, printing technologies, and gunpowder, for example, first appeared in postclassical China and then diffused to other lands. These inventions and others of the era have profoundly influenced the course of human history since their first appearance.

The postclassical era was also crucially important for the formation and development of cultural and religious traditions. Islam first appeared during the postclassical era, and it soon became the cultural and religious foundation of an expansive empire stretching from north Africa to northern India. Buddhism expanded beyond the Indian subcontinent and central Asia, attracting converts in China, Korea, Japan, and southeast Asia. Christianity was the official faith of the Byzantine empire, where the

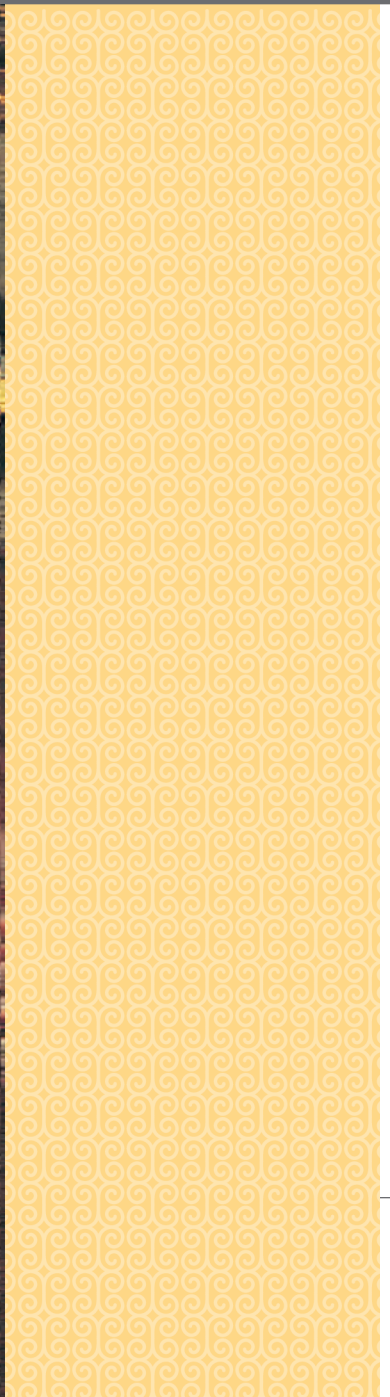


Eastern Orthodox church emerged and gave shape to a distinctive form of Christianity. Orthodox missionaries also spread their faith to formerly pagan lands throughout much of eastern Europe and Russia. Farther west, Christianity spread from the Mediterranean basin to western and northern Europe, where papal leadership guided the emergence of the Roman Catholic church. For a millennium and more, Roman Catholic Christianity served as the foundation for cultural unity in the politically disunited world of western and northern Europe. Meanwhile, quite apart from the expansion of religious faiths, the postclassical era also witnessed the spread of literacy and formal education throughout much of the eastern hemisphere.

The empires and regional states of the postclassical era disappeared long ago, but the social, economic, and cultural legacies of the age are noticeable even today. Long-distance trade surged in postclassical times and helped to structure economic and social development throughout much of the eastern hemisphere. Even more notable, perhaps, religious and cultural traditions continue to flourish in lands where they first attracted converts in postclassical times. In some ways, then, the postclassical age survives even in the modern world. ■

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According to the Byzantine historian Procopius, two Christian monks from Persia set out on a momentous journey about the middle of the sixth century C.E. The result of their travels was the introduction of high-quality silk production to the eastern Mediterranean. Although local crafts workers had long produced coarse fabrics from the cocoons of wild silkworms, fine silks had come to the Mediterranean only from China, where manufacturers closely guarded both their carefully bred strains of silkworms and the complex technology that yielded high-quality textiles. Mediterranean consumers did not obtain silk directly from Chinese producers but, rather, through intermediaries subject to the Sasanid empire of Persia.

According to Procopius's account, the two Christian monks observed the techniques of silk production during the course of a mission to China. Upon departure they hollowed out their walking staffs and filled them with silkworm eggs, which they smuggled out of China, through their native land of Persia, and into the Byzantine empire.

The monks' motives are unknown. Perhaps they resented Sasanid religious policies favoring Zoroastrians and sought to aid Christians in the Byzantine empire. Perhaps they hoped to receive a handsome reward for their efforts. Whatever their motives may have been, though, it is certain that the monks by themselves could not have introduced a full-blown silk industry to Byzantium. The production of fine, Chinese-style silks required more than a few silkworm eggs. It called also for understanding of sophisticated technologies and elaborate procedures that must have reached the Byzantine empire by several different routes. Thus it seems that Procopius simplified a complex story by focusing attention on the monks.

In any case, Byzantine crafts workers soon learned how to breed silkworms, feed them mulberry leaves, unravel their cocoons, and produce high-quality silk fabrics. By the late sixth century, Byzantine silks matched the quality of Chinese products. Mediterranean consumers no longer relied on Chinese producers and Persian intermediaries, and local production of high-quality silk greatly strengthened the Byzantine economy. Thus Procopius's anonymous monks participated in a momentous transfer of technology between distant lands. Their efforts contributed to the vibrance of Byzantine society, and their story highlights the significance of cross-cultural interactions during the postclassical era.

During the centuries after 200 C.E., most of the classical societies faced a series of problems—epidemic disease, declining population, economic contraction, political turmoil, social unrest, and military threats from outside—that brought about their collapse. Only in the eastern Mediterranean did a classical empire survive. The eastern half of the Roman empire, known as the Byzantine empire, withstood the various problems that brought down other

OPPOSITE: A sixth-century icon depicting an enthroned Virgin Mary and infant Jesus attended by angels and saints.

classical societies and survived for almost a millennium after the collapse of the western Roman empire in the fifth century C.E.

The Byzantine empire did not reconstitute the larger Mediterranean society of classical times. The Roman empire had dominated an integrated Mediterranean basin; the Byzantine empire faced a mostly politically and culturally fragmented Mediterranean region. After the seventh century C.E., Islamic states controlled lands to the east and south of the Mediterranean, Slavic peoples dominated lands to the north, and western Europeans organized increasingly powerful states in lands to the west.

Although it was more compact than the Roman empire, the Byzantine empire was a political and economic powerhouse of the postclassical era. Until the twelfth century, Byzantine authority dominated the wealthy and productive eastern Mediterranean region. Manufactured goods from the Byzantine empire enjoyed a reputation for high quality in markets from the Mediterranean basin to India. The Byzantine empire also deeply influenced the historical development of the Slavic peoples of eastern Europe and Russia. Byzantine missionaries and diplomats introduced writing, Christianity, codified law, and sophisticated political organization into lands settled by Slavic peoples. Because Byzantine political, economic, and cultural influence stretched so far, historians often refer to it as the “Byzantine commonwealth.” Just as Greek and Roman initiative brought Mediterranean lands into a larger integrated society during classical times, Byzantine policies led to the formation of a large, multicultural zone of trade, communication, interaction, and exchange in eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean basin during the postclassical era.

The Early Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine empire takes its name from Byzantium—Latinized as Byzantium—a modest market town and fishing village that occupied a site of enormous strategic significance. Situated on a defensible peninsula and blessed with a magnificent natural harbor known as the Golden Horn, Byzantium had the potential to control the Bosphorus, the strait of water leading from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and beyond to the Dardanelles, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean. Apart from its maritime significance, Byzantium also offered convenient access to the rich lands of Anatolia, southwestern Asia, and southeastern Europe. Trade routes linked Byzantium to ports throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Because of its strategic value, the Roman emperor Constantine designated Byzantium as the site of a new imperial capital, which he named Constantinople (“city of Constantine”). He built the new capital partly because the eastern Mediterranean was the wealthier and more productive part of the Roman empire and partly because relocation enabled the imperial court to maintain close watch over both the Sasanid empire in Persia and the Germanic peoples who lived along the lower stretches of the Danube River. The imperial government moved to Constantinople after 330 C.E., and the new capital rapidly reached metropolitan dimensions. By the late fourth century, it was the most important political and military center of the eastern Roman empire, and it soon became the dominant economic and commercial center in the eastern Mediterranean basin. The city kept the name Constantinople until 1453 C.E., when it fell to the Ottoman Turks, who renamed it Istanbul. By convention, however, historians refer to the realm governed from Constantinople between the fifth and fifteenth centuries C.E. as the Byzantine empire, or simply as Byzantium, in honor of the original settlement.



Map 13.1 The Byzantine empire and its neighbors, 527–554 C.E. Compare this map with Map 11.2 showing the Roman empire at its height. How did the territories of the Byzantine empire differ from those of the classical Roman empire?

The Later Roman Empire and Byzantium

The Byzantine empire originated as the eastern half of the classical Roman empire, which survived the collapse of the western Roman empire in the fifth century C.E. In its early days the Byzantine empire embraced Greece, the Balkan region, Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and northeast Africa. Byzantine rulers occasionally expanded their boundaries, and neighboring peoples sometimes seized portions of the Byzantine empire for themselves. During the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., for example, the southern regions of the empire fell into the hands of Arab Muslim conquerors. Generally speaking, however, Byzantium figured as a major power of the eastern Mediterranean basin until the thirteenth century C.E.

As the western Roman empire crumbled in the fifth century C.E., the eastern half of the empire remained intact, complete with roads, communications, lines of authority, and a set of functioning imperial institutions, all inherited from Roman predecessors. Yet the early Byzantine emperors faced challenges different from those of their predecessors, and they built a state significantly different from the classical Roman empire.

The principal challenges that confronted the late Roman and early Byzantine empires were the consolidation of the dynamic Sasanid dynasty (224–641 C.E.) in Persia and the invasions of migratory peoples from the north and east. The Sasanid emperors sought to rebuild the Achaemenid empire of classical Persia, a goal that brought them into conflict with Roman forces in Mesopotamia and Syria. By the late third century, Roman armies had largely stabilized their eastern borders, but until their fall in the seventh century, the Sasanids remained the principal foreign threat to the eastern Roman empire. Germanic invasions also menaced the late Roman empire. Because they did

The Later Roman Empire

In 260 C.E. the Sasanid emperor Shapur I (right) captured the Roman emperor Valerian, as depicted in this cameo medallion of the fourth century.



not have adequate resources to respond strongly to the threat on all fronts, Roman authorities concentrated on maintaining the integrity of the wealthy eastern portion of the empire. In the fifth century, for example, imperial authorities built a massive set of defensive walls to shield Constantinople from invaders, and they invested resources in protection for other major cities as well. As a result, migratory peoples were rarely a serious threat to Constantinople or the other heavily defended cities of the eastern empire.

The Early Byzantine State

Having secured their realm against Sasanids and migratory invaders, the Byzantine emperors built a distinctive tradition of statecraft. The most important feature of the Byzantine state was tightly centralized rule that concentrated power in the hands of a highly exalted emperor. This characteristic was noticeable already in the time of Constantine, who built his new capital to lavish standards. He filled it with libraries, museums, and artistic treasures, and he constructed magnificent marble palaces, churches, baths, and public buildings—all in an effort to create a new Rome fit for the ruler of a mighty empire.

Caesaropapism

Constantine also set a precedent by hedging his rule with an aura of divinity. As protector of the Christians and a baptized Christian himself, Constantine could not claim the divine status that some of his imperial predecessors had sought to appropriate. As the first Christian emperor, however, Constantine claimed divine favor and sanction for his rule. He intervened in theological disputes and used his political position to support views that he considered orthodox and condemn those that he regarded as heretical. Constantine initiated a policy that historians call “caesaropapism,” whereby the emperor not only ruled as secular lord but also played an active and prominent role in ecclesiastical affairs.

Particularly after the sixth century, Byzantine emperors became exalted, absolute rulers. According to Roman law, emperors stood above the law: theoretically, they wielded absolute authority in political, military, judicial, financial, and religious matters. They also enjoyed the services of a large and complex bureaucracy. Indeed, its intricacy gave rise to the adjective *byzantine*, which suggests unnecessary complexity and convolution. In combination, law and bureaucracy produced an exceptionally centralized state.

The Byzantine Court

Even dress and court etiquette drew attention to the lofty status of Byzantine rulers. The emperors wore heavily bejeweled crowns and dressed in magnificent silk robes dyed a dark, rich purple—a color reserved for imperial use and strictly forbidden to those not associated with the ruling house. High officials presented them-

selves to the emperor as slaves, not subjects. When approaching him, they prostrated themselves three times and then ceremoniously kissed the imperial hands and feet before taking up matters of business. By the tenth century, engineers had contrived a series of mechanical devices that worked dazzling effects and impressed foreign envoys at the Byzantine court: imitation birds sang as ambassadors approached the emperor while mechanical lions roared and swished their tails. During an audience the imperial throne itself sometimes moved up and down to emphasize the awesome splendor of the emperor.

Justinian and His Legacy

The most important of the early Byzantine emperors was Justinian (reigned 527–565 C.E.), an energetic and tireless worker known to his subjects as “the sleepless emperor,” who profoundly influenced the development of the Byzantine empire with the aid of his ambitious wife, Theodora. The imperial couple came from obscure origins: Justinian was born into a Macedonian peasant family, and Theodora, the daughter of a bear keeper in the circus, worked as a striptease artist before meeting the future emperor. Yet both Justinian and Theodora were intelligent, strong willed, and disciplined. Thanks to those qualities, Justinian received an excellent education, found a position in the imperial bureaucracy, and soon mastered the intricacies of Byzantine finance. Theodora proved to be a sagacious advisor: she offered Justinian advice on sensitive political, diplomatic, and theological issues, and she contributed to the formation of a grand imperial court.

Like Constantine, Justinian lavished resources on the imperial capital. During the early years of his rule, riots against high taxes had destroyed much of Constantinople. After Theodora persuaded him to deploy the imperial army and quash the disturbances, Justinian embarked on an ambitious construction program that thoroughly remade the city. The most notable building erected during that campaign was the church of Hagia Sophia, a magnificent domed structure that later became a mosque and a museum and that ranks as one of the world’s most important examples of Christian architecture. Visitors marveled at the church’s enormous dome, which they likened to the heavens encircling the earth, and they expressed awe at the gold, silver, gems, precious stones, and thousands of lamps that decorated and illuminated Hagia Sophia. Over time, the church even acquired a reputation for working miraculous cures: its columns and doors reportedly healed the illnesses of people who stood beside them or rubbed against them.

Justinian’s most significant political contribution was his codification of Roman law. The origins of Roman law go back to the time of the kings of Rome, and legal scholars worked to systematize Roman law during the Roman republic and the early empire. Almost immediately after taking the throne, Justinian ordered a systematic review of Roman law that was more thorough than any that had taken place before. On the basis of this work, he issued the *Corpus iuris civilis* (*Body of the Civil Law*), which immediately won recognition as the definitive codification of Roman law. Later emperors updated Roman law by adding new provisions, but Justinian’s code continued to serve as a source of legal inspiration. Through Justinian’s code, for example, Roman law influenced civil law codes throughout much of western Europe.

Justinian’s most ambitious venture was his effort to reconquer the western Roman empire from Germanic peoples and reestablish Roman authority throughout the Mediterranean basin. Beginning in 533 he sent his brilliant general Belisarius on military campaigns that returned Italy, Sicily, northwestern Africa, and southern Spain to imperial rule. By the end of his reign in 565, Justinian had reconstituted a good portion of the classical Roman empire.

Justinian and Theodora

Justinian's Code

Belisarius and Byzantine Conquests



Justinian wears imperial purple robes in this mosaic, from the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, which depicts him in the company of ecclesiastical, military, and court officials.

Justinian's accomplishment, however, did not long survive his rule. Byzantium simply did not possess the resources to sustain Belisarius's conquests. Reconstitution of the Roman empire would have required a long-term occupation of reconquered regions and a costly reassertion of imperial authority. Byzantine forces were unable to hold Rome for very long, and the city of Ravenna on Italy's Adriatic coast became the headquarters of Byzantine authority in the western Mediterranean. As a result, Ravenna possesses magnificent Byzantine art and architecture. But Justinian's dream of restoring Roman authority throughout the Mediterranean basin soon faded.

Indeed, Justinian's efforts clearly showed that the classical Roman empire was beyond recovery. While Justinian devoted his attention to the western Mediterranean, the Sasanids threatened Byzantium from the east and Slavic peoples approached from the north. Justinian's successors had no choice but to withdraw their resources from the western Mediterranean and redeploy them in the east. Even though Belisarius's reconquest of the western Roman empire was a spectacular military accomplishment, it was also something of an anachronism, since the lands of the eastern and western Mediterranean had already begun to follow different historical trajectories.

Islamic Conquests and Byzantine Revival

After the seventh century C.E., the emergence of Islam and the development of a powerful and expansive Islamic state (topics discussed in chapter 14) posed a serious challenge to Byzantium. Inspired by their Islamic faith, Arab peoples conquered the Sasanid



The interior of the church of Hagia Sophia (“Holy Wisdom”), built by Justinian and transformed into a mosque in the fifteenth century. The dome rises almost 60 meters (197 feet) above the floor, and its windows allow abundant light to enter the massive structure.

empire and overran large portions of the Byzantine empire as well. By the mid-seventh century, Byzantine Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and north Africa had fallen under Islamic rule. During the late seventh and early eighth centuries, Islamic forces threatened the heart of the empire and subjected Constantinople to prolonged siege (in 674–678 and again in 717–718). Byzantium resisted this northern thrust of Islam partly because of military technology. Byzantine forces used a weapon known as *Greek fire*—a devastating incendiary weapon compounded of sulphur, lime, and petroleum—which they launched at both the fleets and the ground forces of the invaders. Greek fire burned even when floating on water and thus created a serious hazard when deployed around wooden ships. On land it caused panic among enemy forces, since it was very difficult to extinguish and often burned troops to death. As a result of this defensive effort, the Byzantine empire retained its hold on Anatolia, Greece, and the Balkan region.

Though much reduced by the Islamic conquests, the Byzantine empire was more compact and manageable after the eighth century than was the far-flung realm of Justinian. Byzantine rulers responded to the challenge of Islam with political and social adjustments that strengthened the empire that remained in their hands. The most important innovation was the reorganization of Byzantine society under the *theme* system, which Byzantine rulers had tentatively experimented with during earlier periods of hostility with Sasanid Persia. This system placed a *theme* (an imperial province) under the jurisdiction of a general, who assumed responsibility for both its military

*Imperial
Organization*



Illustration in a manuscript depicts Byzantine naval forces turning Greek fire on their Arab enemies.

defense and its civil administration. Generals received their appointments from the imperial government, which closely supervised their activities to prevent decentralization of power and authority. Generals recruited armies from the ranks of free peasants, who received allotments of land in exchange for military service. The armies proved to be effective military forces, and the system as a whole strengthened the class of free peasants, which in turn solidified Byzantium's agricultural economy. The *theme* system enabled Byzantine forces to mobilize quickly and resist further Islamic advances and also undergirded the political order and social organization of the empire from the eighth through the twelfth century.

Indeed, strengthened by the *theme* system, Byzantium vastly expanded its influence between the late ninth and the late eleventh centuries. During the tenth century Byzantine forces shored up defenses in Anatolia and reconquered Syria from Arab Muslims. During the reign of Basil II (976–1025 C.E.), known as “Basil the Bulgar-Slayer,” Byzantine armies turned west and crushed the neighboring Bulgars, who had built a large and expansive kingdom in the Balkans. After his victory at the battle of Kleidion in 1014 C.E., Basil reportedly commanded his forces to blind fourteen thousand Bulgarian survivors, though he spared one eye in a few who then guided the others home. By the mid-eleventh century the Byzantine empire encompassed lands from Syria and Armenia in the east to southern Italy in the west, from the Danube River in the north to Cyprus and Crete in the south. Byzantine expansion brought in so much wealth that Basil was able to waive the collection of taxes for two years. Once again, Byzantium dominated the eastern Mediterranean.

Byzantium and Western Europe

Tensions between Byzantium and Western European States

While they went to war with their Arab Muslim and pagan Slavic neighbors, Byzantines also experienced tense ecclesiastical and political relations with their Christian counterparts in the western Mediterranean. The Christian church of Constantinople conducted its affairs in Greek and bowed to the will of the caesaropapist emperors, whereas the Christian church of Rome conducted its affairs in Latin and rejected imperial claims to oversee ecclesiastical matters. Ecclesiastical authorities in Byzantium regarded Roman Christians as poorly educated and uncouth. Church leaders in Rome considered their Byzantine counterparts subtle and learned but insincere and insufficiently wary of heresy.

Political grievances also strained relations between Byzantium and western European lands. During the fifth and sixth centuries, imperial authorities could do little more than watch as Germanic peoples established successor states to the western Roman empire. Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, and others imposed their rule on lands that Byzantine emperors regarded as their rightful inheritance. Worse yet, some of the upstart powers claimed imperial authority for themselves. In 800, for example, the Frankish ruler Charlemagne received an imperial crown from the pope in Rome, thereby directly challenging Byzantine claims to imperial authority over western lands. Charlemagne's empire soon dissolved, but in 962 Otto of Saxony lodged his claim to rule as emperor over the western lands of the former Roman empire. Adding injury to insult, Otto then attacked lands in southern Italy that had been in Byzantine possession since the days of Justinian.

The tenor of relations between Byzantium and western European lands emerges clearly from the report of an ambassador named Liudprand of Cremona, whom Otto sent on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople in 968. Liudprand described the Byzantine emperor as "a monstrosity of a man, a dwarf, fat-headed and with tiny mole's eyes; disfigured by a short, broad, thick beard half going gray; disgraced by a neck scarcely an inch long; piglike by reason of the big close bristles on his head." Liudprand despised Byzantine food, drink, dress, and shelter, and he denounced his diplomatic counterparts as slippery, scheming liars. He described Constantinople itself as a formerly prosperous and illustrious city that had become shabby, sleazy, and pretentious. In light of those attitudes, it is hardly surprising that Byzantium and western European lands experienced almost continuously strained relations until the fall of the Byzantine empire.

*Liudprand
of Cremona*

Byzantine Economy and Society

Byzantium dominated the political and military affairs of the eastern Mediterranean largely because of its strong economy. Ever since classical times, the territories embraced by the Byzantine empire had produced abundant agricultural surpluses, supported large numbers of crafts workers, and participated in trade with lands throughout the Mediterranean. The economic and social assets of the eastern Mediterranean did not disappear with the classical Roman empire. Instead, they continued to provide a solid material foundation for Byzantium, and they helped to make the Byzantine empire an economic powerhouse of the postclassical era.

Rural Economy and Society

Until its conquest by Arab forces, Egypt was the major source of grain for Byzantium. Afterward, Anatolia and the lower Danube region served as the imperial breadbasket. All these lands produced abundant harvests of wheat, which supported large populations in Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Antioch, Trebizond, and other major cities. Throughout most of Byzantium's existence, Constantinople was the largest city in Europe: between the fifth and the early thirteenth centuries, its population approached or exceeded one million people. Only on the basis of a reliable and productive agricultural economy was it possible for a city of that size to survive and flourish.

Byzantine economy and society were strongest when the empire supported a large class of free peasants who owned small plots of land. Besides serving as the backbone of the Byzantine military system, free peasants cultivated their land intensively in hopes of improving their families' fortunes. As in other societies, however, wealthy individuals and families sought to accumulate land, the principal source of wealth in Byzantium as elsewhere. Especially in the early centuries of the Byzantine empire, wealthy cultivators

The Peasantry



A manuscript illustration depicts one Byzantine woman weaving cloth (left) while another spins thread (right). Both women veil their hair for modesty. Women workers were prominent in Byzantine textile production.

tiles to the list of products manufactured in the Byzantine empire. Silk was a most important addition to the economy, and Byzantium became the principal supplier of this fashionable fabric to lands in the Mediterranean basin. The silk industry was so important to the Byzantine economy that the government closely supervised every step in its production and sale. Regulations allowed individuals to participate in only one activity—such as weaving, dyeing, or sales—to prevent the creation of a monopoly in the industry by a few wealthy or powerful entrepreneurs.

Trade also helped to sustain the Byzantine economy. Situated astride routes going east and west as well as north and south, Constantinople served as the main clearinghouse for trade in the western part of Eurasia. The merchants of Constantinople maintained direct commercial links with manufacturers and merchants in central Asia, Russia, Scandinavia, northern Europe, and the lands of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean basin. Even after the early Islamic conquests, Byzantine merchants dealt regularly with their Muslim counterparts in Persia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt except during periods of outright war between Byzantium and Islamic states. Byzantium dominated trade to such an extent that trading peoples recognized the Byzantine gold coin, the *bezant*, as the standard currency of the Mediterranean basin for more than half a millennium, from the sixth through the twelfth century.

Byzantium drew enormous wealth simply from the control of trade and the levying of customs duties on merchandise that passed through its lands. More important, Byzantium served as the western anchor of a Eurasian trading network that revived the silk roads of classical times. Silk and porcelain came to Constantinople from China, spices from India and southeast Asia. Carpets arrived from Persia, woolen textiles from western Europe, and timber, furs, honey, amber, and slaves came from Russia and Scandinavia. Byzantine subjects consumed some commodities from distant lands, but they redistributed most merchandise, often after adding to its value by further processing—by fashioning jewelry out of gems imported from India, for example, or by dyeing raw woolen cloth imported from western Europe.

Banks and business partnerships helped to fuel Byzantine trade. Banks advanced loans to individuals seeking to launch business ventures and thus made trade possible

Trade

The Organization of Trade

A manuscript illustration from the ninth century depicts Byzantine shipbuilders at work.



even when merchants did not personally possess large supplies of liquid wealth. Byzantine merchants often formed partnerships, which allowed them to pool their resources and limit their risks. Neither banking nor partnership was an altogether new technique: both had origins in classical Mediterranean business practices. Yet Byzantine businessmen made much more extensive use than their predecessors had of banking and cooperative partnerships, which provided both support and stimulus for a dynamic commercial economy.

Urban Life

Constantinople had no rival among Byzantine cities. Subjects of the Byzantine empire referred to it simply as “the City.” The heart of the City was the imperial palace,

Sources from the Past

The Wealth and Commerce of Constantinople

The Spanish rabbi Benjamin of Tudela traveled throughout Europe, north Africa, and southwest Asia between 1165 and 1173 C.E. He may have ventured as far as India, and he mentioned both India and China in his travel account. His main purpose was to record the conditions of Jewish communities, but he also described the many lands and about three hundred cities that he visited. His travels took place during an era of political decline for the Byzantine empire, yet he still found Constantinople a flourishing and prosperous city.

The circumference of the city of Constantinople is eighteen miles; half of it is surrounded by the sea, and half by land, and it is situated upon two arms of the sea, one coming from the sea of Russia [the Black Sea], and one from the sea of Sepharad [the Mediterranean].

All sorts of merchants come here from the land of Babylon, from the land of Shinar [Mesopotamia], from Persia, Media [western Iran], and all the sovereignty of the land of Egypt, from the land of Canaan [Palestine], and the empire of Russia, from Hungary, Patzinakia [Ukraine], Khazaria [southern Russia], and the land of Lombardy [northern Italy] and Sepharad [Spain].

Constantinople is a busy city, and merchants come to it from every country by sea or land, and there is none like it in the world except Baghdad, the great city of Islam. In Constantinople is the church of Hagia Sophia, and the seat of the pope of the Greeks, since Greeks do not obey the pope of Rome. There are also as many churches as there are days of the year. . . . And in this church [Hagia Sophia] there are pillars of gold and silver, and lamps of silver and gold more than a man can count.

Close to the walls of the palace is also a place of amusement belonging to the emperor, which is called the Hippodrome, and every year on the anniversary of the birth of Jesus the emperor gives a great entertainment there. And in that place men from all the races of

the world come before the emperor and empress with jugglery and without jugglery, and they introduce lions, leopards, bears, and wild asses, and they engage them in combat with one another; and the same thing is done with birds. No entertainment like this is to be found in any other land. . . .

From every part of the Byzantine empire tribute is brought here every year, and they fill strongholds with garments of silk, purple, and gold. Like unto these storehouses and this wealth there is nothing in the whole world to be found. It is said that the tribute of the city amounts every year to 20,000 gold pieces, derived both from the rents of shops and markets and from the tribute of merchants who enter by sea or land.

The Greek inhabitants are very rich in gold and precious stones, and they go clothed in garments of silk and gold embroidery, and they ride horses and look like princes. Indeed, the land is very rich in all cloth stuffs and in bread, meat, and wine.

Wealth like that of Constantinople is not to be found in the whole world. Here also are men learned in all the books of the Greeks, and they eat and drink, every man under his vine and his fig-tree.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How is it possible to account for the prosperity that Benjamin of Tudela found in Constantinople?

SOURCE: Benjamin of Tudela. *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*. Trans. by M. N. Adler. London: H. Frowde, 1907. (Translation slightly modified.)

which employed twenty thousand workers as palace staff. Peacocks strutted through gardens filled with sculptures and fountains. Most famous was a gold fountain that spouted wine for imperial guests.

Aristocrats maintained enormous palaces that included courtyards, reception halls, libraries, chapels, and quarters for members of the extended family as well as servants and slaves. Already in the fifth century, Constantinople boasted 4,388 mansions, as well as 14 imperial and princely palaces. Women lived in separate apartments and did not receive male visitors from outside the household. Indeed, women often did not

Housing in Constantinople

participate in banquets and parties, especially when wine flowed freely or when the affairs were likely to become so festive that they could compromise a woman's honor.

The less privileged classes of Constantinople occupied less splendid dwellings. Artisans and crafts workers usually lived in rooms above their shops, and clerks and government officials lived in multistory apartment buildings. Workers and the poor occupied dangerous and rickety tenements, sharing kitchens and sanitary facilities with their neighbors.

Attractions of Constantinople

Even for the poor, though, the City had its attractions. As the heir to Rome, Constantinople was a city of baths, which were sites of relaxation and exercise as well as hygienic bathing. Taverns and restaurants offered settings for social gatherings—checkers, chess, and dice games were especially popular activities at taverns—and theaters provided entertainment in the form of song, dance, and striptease. Mass entertainment took place in the Hippodrome, a large stadium adjacent to the imperial palace. There Byzantine subjects watched athletic matches, contests between wild animals, and circuses featuring clowns, jugglers, acrobats, and dwarfs.

Greens and Blues

Most popular of the City's pastimes were the chariot races that took place in the Hippodrome. Spectators' passions for chariot teams ran high, and until the seventh century they often contributed to public disturbances. Racing fans formed two factions—the Greens and the Blues—that pursued their rivalry well beyond the Hippodrome. Greens and Blues frequently fought in the streets and constantly sought to influence imperial officials to favor one group over the other. On one occasion, Greens and Blues united and mounted a serious popular uprising against the high taxes imposed by Justinian. In 532 they seized the Hippodrome and proclaimed a new emperor. Belisarius's army quelled the disturbance, but only after killing thousands of rioters. The rebellion left Constantinople in shambles, and Justinian took the opportunity to rebuild the city on a lavish scale. By the late seventh century, the rivalry between Greens and Blues had faded. The factions remained, but they increasingly took on the character of civic societies, and leaders of the two groups became respected officials at the imperial court.

Classical Heritage and Orthodox Christianity

The first Christian emperor of the Roman empire gave both his name and his faith to Constantinople. Like the Byzantine state, however, Byzantine Christianity developed along distinctive lines, and it became a faith different from the early Christianity of the Roman empire. The philosophy and literature of classical Greece had a much deeper influence in Byzantium than in western Europe, and the classical legacy helped to shape Byzantine education and cultural development as well as Orthodox Christianity. Byzantine church leaders disagreed with their western counterparts on matters of doctrine, ritual, and church authority. By the mid-eleventh century, differences between the eastern and western churches had become so great that their leaders formally divided Mediterranean Christianity into the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

The Legacy of Classical Greece

Although local inhabitants spoke Greek, the official language of early Constantinople was Latin, the language of Rome. The connection between Byzantium and Rome was apparent in Justinian's code of laws, which appeared in Latin. After the sixth century, however, Greek replaced Latin as the language of government in the Byzantine empire. Byzantine scholars often did not learn to read Latin, and they drew intellectual

inspiration from the New Testament (originally composed in Greek) and the philosophy and literature of classical Greece rather than classical Rome.

The legacy of classical Greece was especially noticeable in Byzantine education. An educational system was necessary because of the large bureaucracy that administered the empire: government machinery called for large numbers of literate and intelligent individuals. Byzantine aristocrats often hired tutors to provide private instruction for their children, girls as well as boys. But the bureaucratic workforce emerged mostly from a state-organized school system that offered a primary education in reading, writing, and grammar, followed by studies of classical Greek literature, philosophy, and science.

Although most peasants and many urban workers had no formal education, basic literacy was widespread in Byzantine society. Besides the bureaucrats, Byzantine merchants, manufacturers, clergy, and military personnel usually had at least a primary education. At the pinnacle of the state educational system was a school of higher learning in Constantinople that offered advanced instruction in law, medicine, and philosophy. This school functioned almost continuously from its founding in 425 C.E. until the end of the Byzantine empire more than one thousand years later in 1453.

Like the educational system, Byzantine scholarship reflected the cultural legacy of classical Greece. Byzantine scholars concentrated on the humanities—literature, history, and philosophy—rather than on the natural sciences or medicine. They produced commentaries on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and other prominent figures, and their works served as textbooks studied in schools alongside writings from classical times. Byzantines with a literary education considered themselves the direct heirs of classical Greece, and they went to great lengths to preserve and transmit the classical legacy. Indeed, almost all literary and philosophical works of classical Greece that survive have come down to the present in copies made between the tenth and twelfth centuries in the Byzantine empire.

Byzantine Education

Byzantine Scholarship

The Byzantine Church

The influence of classical Greece was so powerful and so persistent that many Byzantine elites continued to honor the pagan gods through at least the sixth century C.E. In the year 528, however, Emperor Justinian launched a campaign to force all remaining pagans to undergo Christian baptism, and in 529 he prohibited the public teaching of pagan philosophy in Athens, the cultural cradle of classical Greece. By the mid-sixth century, life was becoming increasingly difficult for those who continued to respect the pagan gods, and Christianity emerged as the dominant cultural community of the Byzantine empire.

The Byzantine church was quite different from the earliest Christian community, which had generated many different teachings and practices. The most distinctive feature of Byzantine Christianity was its close relationship with the imperial government, which carefully supervised the development of church teachings and policies in the interests of molding a community that would provide cultural support for the Byzantine state. From the time of Constantine on, caesaropapist emperors participated actively in religious and theological matters. Constantine himself intervened in theological debates, even when the issues at stake had little or no direct political implication. In 325 C.E., for example, Constantine organized the Council of Nicaea, which brought together bishops, spokesmen, and leaders from all the important Christian churches to consider the views of the Arians. Followers of a priest from Alexandria named Arius (250–336 C.E.), the Arians taught that Jesus had been a mortal human being and that he was a creation of God rather than a divine being coeternal with God. Yet many Christian theologians held to the contrary: that in a unique and mysterious way Jesus

Church and State

was both a mortal human being and a manifestation of God himself, that Jesus simultaneously possessed fully human and fully divine natures. Although he originally favored Arian views, Constantine came to accept the alternative and personally attended sessions of the Council of Nicaea to support it. His presence encouraged the council to endorse his preferred view as orthodox and to condemn Arianism as heresy.

Throughout Byzantine history the emperors treated the church as a department of state. They appointed individuals to serve as patriarch of Constantinople—the highest ecclesiastical official in the Byzantine church, counterpart of the pope in Rome—and they instructed patriarchs, bishops, and priests to deliver sermons that supported imperial policy and encouraged obedience to imperial authorities. This caesaropapism was a source of constant conflict between imperial and ecclesiastical authorities, and it also had the potential to generate large-scale dissent and protest when imperial views clashed with those of the larger society.

Iconoclasm

The most divisive ecclesiastical policy implemented by Byzantine emperors was iconoclasm, inaugurated by Emperor Leo III (reigned 717–741 C.E.). By the time of Leo's rule, Byzantium had a long tradition of producing icons—paintings of Jesus, saints, and other figures of religious significance—many of which were splendid works of art. For most theologians these icons served a useful purpose in that they inspired the popular imagination and encouraged reverence for holy personages. Leo, however, became convinced that the veneration of religious images was sinful, tantamount to the worship of physical idols. In 726 C.E. he embarked on the policy of iconoclasm (which literally means “the breaking of icons”), destroying religious images and prohibiting their use in churches. The policy immediately sparked protests and riots throughout the empire, since icons were extremely popular among the laity. Debates about iconoclasm raged in Byzantium for more than a century. Only in 843 did the iconoclasts abandon their efforts. Meanwhile, the controversy demonstrated once again the willingness of Byzantine emperors to involve themselves directly in religious and theological matters.

In its theology, Byzantine Christianity reflected the continuing influence of classical Greek philosophy. Christianity had originally emerged from Jewish sources. As it attracted adherents in the Roman empire, theologians sought to harmonize Christianity with other, long-established, cultural traditions, notably Greek philosophy. A faith embracing both Christian revelation and Greek reason, they recognized, would have a powerful appeal.

Greek Philosophy and Byzantine Theology

The influence of Greek philosophy in Christian theology was especially prominent in Greek-speaking Byzantium. Theologians invested a great deal of time and intellectual energy in the examination of religious questions from a philosophical point of view. They looked to classical philosophy, for example, when seeking to understand the nature of Jesus and the extent to which he possessed both human and divine characteristics. Although these debates often became extremely technical, they illustrate the continuing influence of classical Greek philosophy. Debates about Jesus' nature represented an effort to understand Christian doctrine in light of the terms and concepts that classical philosophers had employed in their analysis of the world. A school maintained by the patriarch of Constantinople provided instruction for clergy and church officials in advanced theology of this sort. Though it differed in many ways from Mediterranean society of classical times, Byzantium built cultural and religious traditions on a solid classical foundation.

Monasticism and Popular Piety

Caesaropapist emperors, powerful patriarchs, and other high church officials concerned themselves with theological and ritual matters and rarely dealt directly with the lay population of the Byzantine church. For their part the Byzantine laity had little



This illustration from a psalter prepared about 900 c.e. depicts an iconoclast whitewashing an image of Jesus painted on a wall.

interest in fine points of theology or high-level church administration, and they positively resented policies such as iconoclasm that infringed on cherished patterns of worship. For religious inspiration, the laity looked less to the church hierarchy than to the local monasteries.

Byzantine monasticism grew out of the efforts of devout individuals to lead especially holy lives. Drawing inspiration from early Christian ascetics in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, these individuals observed regimes of extreme asceticism and self-denial. Some abandoned society altogether and went to live in the desert or in caves as hermits. Others dedicated themselves to celibacy, fasting, and prayer. During the fifth century a few men and at least two women demonstrated their ascetic commitments by perching for years at a time atop tall pillars. St. Simeon Stylite, the first and most famous of these “pillar saints,” attracted the attention of admirers from as far away as Gaul.

Because of the extreme dedication of hermits and ascetics, disciples often gathered around them and established communities of men and women determined to follow their example. These communities became the earliest monasteries of the Byzantine church. They had few rules until St. Basil of Caesarea (329–379 C.E.), the patriarch of Constantinople during the mid-fourth century, urged them to adopt reforms that enhanced their effectiveness. In Basilian monasteries, monks and nuns gave up their personal possessions and lived communally. They obeyed the rule of elected superiors, and all community members devoted themselves to work and prayer. After the fourth century, Basilian monasticism spread rapidly throughout the Byzantine empire.

Asceticism

Byzantine Monasticism and St. Basil

Sources from the Past

Anna Comnena on the Suppression of Bogomil Heretics

Anna Comnena (1083–1148), daughter of the Byzantine emperor Alexius I (reigned 1081–1118), wrote the Alexiad, a laudatory history of her father’s reign. In the following selection, she discusses his prosecution in 1110 of Bogomil heretics, who revived the dualist teachings of the Manichaeans. Her account makes it clear that the caesaropapist Byzantine emperors took seriously their commitment to the Orthodox church and their obligation to protect its interests.

Later . . . there arose an extraordinary “cloud of heretics,” a new hostile group, hitherto unknown to the Church . . . Apparently it was in existence before my father’s time, but was unperceived (for the Bogomils’ sect is most adept at feigning virtue). No worldly hairstyles are to be seen among Bogomils: their wickedness is hidden beneath cloak and cowl. Your Bogomil wears a somber look; muffled up to the nose, he walks with a stoop, quietly muttering to himself—but inside he’s a ravening wolf. This unpleasant race, like a serpent lurking in its hole, was brought to the light and lured out by my father with magical incantations. . . .

The fame of the Bogomils had by now spread to all parts, for the impious sect was controlled with great cunning by a certain monk called Basil. He had twelve followers whom he called “apostles” and also dragged along with him certain female disciples, women of bad character, utterly depraved. In all quarters he made his wicked influence felt and when the evil, like some consuming fire, devoured many souls, the emperor could no longer bear it. He instituted a thorough inquiry into the heresy. . . .

. . . Alexius condemned the heretics out of hand: chorus and chorus-leader alike were to suffer death by burning. When the Bogomils had been hunted down and brought together in one place, some clung to the heresy, but others denied the charges completely, protesting strongly against their accusers and rejecting the Bogomilian heresy with scorn. . . .

The emperor glared at them and said, “Two pyres will have to be lit today. By one a cross will be planted firmly in the ground. Then a choice will be offered to all: those who are prepared to die for their Christian faith will separate themselves from the rest and take up position by the pyre with the cross; the Bogomilian adher-

ents will be thrown on the other. Surely it is better that even Christians should die than live to be hounded down as Bogomils and offend the conscience of the majority. Go away, then, all of you, to whichever pyre you choose” . . .

A huge crowd gathered and stood all about them. Fires were then lit, burning seven times more fiercely than usual. . . . The flames leapt to the heavens. By one pyre stood the cross. Each of the condemned was given his choice, for all were to be burnt. Now that escape was clearly impossible, the orthodox to a man moved over to the pyre with the cross, truly prepared to suffer martyrdom; the godless adherents of the abominable heresy went off to the other. Just as they were about to be thrown on the flames, all the bystanders broke into mourning for the Christians; they were filled with indignation against the emperor (they did not know of his plan). But an order came from him just in time to stop the executioners. Alexius had in this way obtained firm evidence of those who were really Bogomils. The Christians, who were victims of calumny, he released after giving them much advice; the rest [i.e., the Bogomils] were committed once again to prison, but the [Bogomil] “apostles” were kept apart. Later he sent for some of these men every day and personally taught them, with frequent exhortations to abandon their abominable cult. . . . And some did change for the better and were freed from prison, but others died in their heresy, still incarcerated, although they were supplied with plentiful food and clothing.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Why did Byzantine rulers go to such lengths to suppress heresy?

SOURCE: Anna Comnena. *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*. Trans. by E. R. A. Sewter. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, pp. 496–505. (Translation slightly modified.)

Unlike their counterparts in western Europe and other lands, Byzantine monasteries for the most part did not become centers of education, study, learning, and scholarship. Yet monasteries under the rule of St. Basil had a reputation for piety and devotion that endeared them to the Byzantine laity. Basilian monks went to great lengths in search of mystical union with God through meditation and prayer. Some employed special techniques such as controlled breathing and intensely focused gazing to bring divine illumination. Others retired to remote destinations to lead a strict existence. Most famous of the austere monasteries are those of Mt. Athos, a cold and windswept peninsula in northern Greece that has been the site of monasteries since the ninth century C.E. Since the eleventh century, monastic authorities have made Mt. Athos off-limits for all females, both human and animal, out of concern that they might inspire carnal thoughts among the monks. The strict devotion of the monks of Mt. Athos and other Basilian monasteries inspired piety among the Byzantine laity because the monks represented a religious faith more immediate and meaningful than that of the theologians and ecclesiastical bureaucrats of Constantinople.

Mt. Athos

Monks and nuns also provided social services to their communities. They provided spiritual counsel to local laity, and they organized relief efforts by bringing food and medical attention to communities struck by disasters. They won the support of the Byzantine populace, too, when they vigorously opposed the policy of iconoclasm and fought to restore icons to churches and monasteries. Tensions sometimes arose between clergy and laity because monasteries often owned extensive tracts of land, and the monks had different economic interests from the peasants who worked the land. Nevertheless, by setting examples of devotion and by tending to the needs and interests of the laity, monks helped to maintain support for their faith in the Byzantine empire.

Tensions between Eastern and Western Christianity

Byzantine Christianity developed in tension particularly with the Christian faith of western Europe. During the centuries following Constantine's legalization of Christianity, church leaders in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome exercised great influence in the larger Christian community. After Arab peoples conquered most of southwest Asia and introduced Islam there in the seventh century, the influence of the patriarchs in Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch declined, leaving only Constantinople and Rome as the principal centers of Christian authority.

The tensions that developed between Constantinople and Rome mirrored political strains between Byzantine and western European societies. The specific issues that divided the two Christian communities, however, were religious and theological. One was the iconoclastic movement of the eighth and ninth centuries. Western theologians regarded religious images as perfectly appropriate aids to devotion and resented Byzantine claims to the contrary, whereas the iconoclasts took offense at the efforts of their Roman counterparts to have images restored in Byzantium.

*Constantinople
and Rome*

In later centuries, Christian churches based in Constantinople and Rome disagreed on many other points. Some ritual and doctrinal differences concerned forms of worship and the precise wording of theological teachings—relatively minor issues that by themselves need not have caused deep division in the larger Christian community. Byzantine theologians objected, for example, to the fact that western priests shaved their beards and used unleavened instead of leavened bread when saying Mass. Other differences concerned substantive theological matters such as the precise relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—all regarded as manifestations of God by most Christian theologians.

Schism

As well as those ritual and doctrinal differences, the Byzantine patriarchs and Roman popes disputed their respective rights and powers. Patriarchs argued for the autonomy of all major Christian jurisdictions, including that of Constantinople, whereas popes asserted the primacy of Rome as the sole seat of authority for all Christendom. Ultimately, relations became so strained that the eastern and western churches went separate ways. In 1054 C.E. the patriarch and the pope excommunicated each other, each refusing to recognize the other's church as properly Christian. Despite efforts at reconciliation, the resulting schism between eastern and western churches persists to the present day. In recognition of the split, historians refer to the eastern Christian church after 1054 as the Eastern Orthodox church and its western counterpart as the Roman Catholic church.

The Influence of Byzantium in Eastern Europe

Byzantines called themselves *Romaioi* (“Romans”), and aristocrats sometimes traced their lineage to ancestors who went to Constantinople with Constantine. Yet, by about 1000 C.E., Byzantium differed profoundly from Mediterranean society of classical times. Under Roman rule the Mediterranean basin had formed a coherent political and economic unit, as trade and cultural exchanges linked all lands and peoples of the region. By the second millennium C.E., however, a dynamic society founded on the Islamic faith had seized control of the lands on the Mediterranean's southern and eastern rims, and Byzantines and western Europeans contested the northern rim. Hemmed in and increasingly pressured by Islamic and western European societies, Byzantium entered a period of decline beginning about the late eleventh century.

As its Mediterranean influence waned, however, Byzantium turned its attention to eastern Europe and Russia. Through political, commercial, and cultural relations, Byzantium decisively influenced the history of Slavic peoples. The Byzantine state itself came to an end in the fifteenth century C.E. But because of the Byzantine commonwealth—the larger collection of societies in eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean basin that developed under Byzantine political, economic, and cultural influence during the postclassical era—the legacy of Byzantium survives and continues to shape the lives of millions of people in Russia and eastern Europe.

Domestic Problems and Foreign Pressures

When Basil II, the “Bulgar-Slayer,” died in 1025 C.E., the Byzantine empire was a political, military, and economic dynamo. Within fifty years, however, the empire was suffering from serious internal weaknesses and had endured a series of military reverses. In fact, it had entered a long period of gradual but sustained decline from which it never fully recovered. Both domestic and foreign problems help to explain that decline.

Social Problems

Domestic problems arose, ironically, from the success of the *theme* system. Generals who governed the *themes* were natural allies of local aristocrats who held large tracts of land. Generals and their offspring intermarried with the local aristocracies, creating an elite class with tremendous military, political, social, and economic power. Some of these powerful families resisted the policies of the imperial government and even mounted rebellions against central authorities. The rebels never managed to defeat the imperial forces, but their revolts seriously disrupted local economies. Moreover, the elite class accumulated vast estates that placed the free peasantry under increasing pressure. Formerly the backbone of Byzantium's military system and its agricultural economy, by the mid-eleventh century the free peasantry was declining both in numbers and in prosperity. As a result, Byzantine military forces had fewer recruits available for



Map 13.2 The Byzantine empire and its neighbors, ca. 1100 C.E. After the emergence of Islam, the Byzantine empire shrank dramatically in size. To what extent does the expansion of Islam help explain the fact that Byzantine influence was strongest in eastern Europe after the seventh century C.E.?

service, and declining tax receipts from free peasants caused fiscal problems for the imperial government.

As domestic problems mounted, Byzantium also faced fresh foreign challenges. From the west came representatives of a dynamic and expanding western European society. Beginning in the eleventh century, vigorous economic development in western Europe supported a remarkable round of military and political expansion. During the early eleventh century, the Normans—a Scandinavian people who had seized Normandy (in northern France) and settled there—established themselves as an independent power in southern Italy. By midcentury Norman adventurers led by Robert Guiscard had taken control of southern Italy and expelled Byzantine authorities there.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Normans and other western European peoples mounted a series of crusades—vast military campaigns intended to recapture Jerusalem and other sites holy to Christians from Muslims—and took the opportunity to carve out states in the heart of the Byzantine empire. Venetian merchants even managed to divert the fourth crusade (1202–1204) from its original mission in the eastern Mediterranean to Constantinople. Venetians had become prominent in the commercial life of the eastern Mediterranean, and they viewed the fourth crusade as an opportunity to strengthen their position against Byzantine competition. As it happened, the expedition never got beyond Constantinople, which crusaders conquered and sacked in 1204. Byzantine forces recaptured the capital in 1261, but the destruction of Constantinople had dealt the Byzantine empire a blow from which it never completely recovered.

As Europeans expanded into Byzantine territory from the west, nomadic Turkish peoples invaded from the east. Most important among them were the Muslim

*Challenges
from the West*

*Challenges
from the East*



During the sack of Constantinople in 1204, crusading forces seized and carted away Byzantine treasures of all sorts—including the great bronze horses that now stand over the entrance to St. Mark's basilica in Venice.

Saljuqs, who beginning in the eleventh century sent waves of invaders into Anatolia. Given the military and financial problems of the Byzantine empire, the Saljuqs found Anatolia ripe for plunder. In 1071 they subjected the Byzantine army to a demoralizing defeat at the battle of Manzikert. Byzantine factions then turned on each other in civil war, allowing the Saljuqs almost free rein in Anatolia. By the late twelfth century, the Saljuqs had seized much of Anatolia, and crusaders from western Europe held most of the remainder.

The loss of Anatolia—the principal source of Byzantine grain, wealth, and military forces—sealed the fate of the Byzantine empire. A territorially truncated Byzantium survived until the mid-fifteenth century, but the late Byzantine empire enjoyed little autonomy and continually faced fresh challenges from Italian merchants, western European adventurers, and Turkish nomads. In 1453, after a long era of decline, the Byzantine empire came to an end when Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople and absorbed its territories into their expanding realm.

Early Relations between Byzantium and Slavic Peoples

Saljuqs (sahl-JYOOKS)

By the time Constantinople fell, Byzantine traditions had deeply influenced the political and cultural development of Slavic peoples in eastern Europe and Russia. Close re-

lations between Byzantium and Slavic peoples date from the sixth century. When Justinian deployed Byzantium's military resources in the western Mediterranean, Slavic peoples from the north took advantage of the opportunity to move into Byzantine territory. Serbs and Croats moved into the Balkan peninsula, and Bulgars established a powerful kingdom in the lower Danube region.

Relations between Byzantium and Bulgaria were especially tense. By the eighth century, however, as a result of its wealth and sophisticated diplomacy, Byzantium had begun to influence Bulgarian politics and society. Byzantine emperors recognized Bulgarian rulers, enhancing their status as legitimate sovereigns. Byzantium and Bulgaria entered into political, commercial, and cultural relations. Members of Bulgarian ruling families often went to Constantinople for a formal education in Greek language and literature and followed Byzantine examples in organizing their court and capital.

Byzantium also sent missionaries to Balkan lands, and Bulgars and other Slavic peoples began to convert to Orthodox Christianity. The most famous of the missionaries to the Slavs were Saints Cyril and Methodius, two brothers from Thessaloniki in Greece. During the mid-ninth century Cyril and Methodius conducted missions in Bulgaria and Moravia (which included much of the modern Czech, Slovakian, and Hungarian territories). While there, they devised an alphabet, known as the Cyrillic alphabet, for the previously illiterate Slavic peoples. Though adapted from written Greek, the Cyrillic alphabet represented the sounds of Slavic languages more precisely than did the Greek, and it remained in use in much of eastern Europe until supplanted by the Roman alphabet in the twentieth century. In Russia and most other parts of the former Soviet Union, the Cyrillic alphabet survives to the present day.

The creation of a written Slavic language enabled Slavic peoples to organize complex political structures and develop sophisticated traditions of thought and literature. More immediately, the Cyrillic alphabet stimulated conversion to Orthodox Christianity. Missionaries translated the Christian scriptures and church rituals into Slavonic, and Cyrillic writing helped them explain Christian values and ideas in Slavic terms. Meanwhile, schools organized by missionaries ensured that Slavs would receive religious instruction with their introduction to basic literacy. As a result, Orthodox Christianity deeply influenced the cultural traditions of many Slavic peoples.



This illustration from a twelfth-century manuscript depicts ninth-century incursions of Bulgarians into Byzantine territory, culminating in a lecture by the Bulgarian king to the Byzantine emperor, shown here with bound hands.

Cyril and Methodius

Missions to the Slavs

Byzantium and Russia

North of Bulgaria another Slavic people began to organize large states: the Russians. About the mid-ninth century Russians created several principalities governed from thriving trading centers, notably Kiev. Strategically situated on the Dnieper River along the main trade route linking Scandinavia and Byzantium, Kiev became a wealthy and powerful center, and it dominated much of the territory between the Volga and the Dnieper from the tenth to the thirteenth century. Russian merchants visited Constantinople in large numbers and became well acquainted with Byzantine society. Russian princes sought alliances with Byzantine rulers and began to express an interest in Orthodox Christianity.

The Conversion of Prince Vladimir

About 989 Prince Vladimir of Kiev converted to Orthodox Christianity and ordered his subjects to follow his example. Vladimir was no paragon of virtue: he lauded drunkenness and reportedly maintained a harem of eight hundred girls. After his conversion, however, Byzantine influences flowed rapidly into Russia. Cyrillic writing, literacy, and Orthodox missions all spread quickly throughout Russia. Byzantine teachers traveled north to establish schools, and Byzantine priests conducted services for Russian converts. For two centuries Kiev served as a conduit for the spread of Byzantine cultural and religious influence in Russia.

The Growth of Kiev

Byzantine art and architecture dominated Kiev and other Russian cities. Icons in the Byzantine style encouraged popular piety, and religious images became a principal form of Russian artistic expression. The onion domes that are a distinctive feature of early Russian churches were the result of architects' efforts to imitate the domed structures of Constantinople using wood as their principal building material.

The princes of Kiev established firm, caesaropapist control over the Russian Orthodox church—so called to distinguish it from the Eastern Orthodox church of the Byzantine empire. They also drew inspiration from Byzantine legal tradition and compiled a written law code for their lands. By controlling trade with Byzantium and other lands, they gained financial resources to build a flourishing society. In the eleventh century Kiev reportedly had four hundred churches and eight large marketplaces. By the early twelfth century its population approached thirty thousand, and a fire in 1124 reportedly consumed six hundred churches.

Eventually, Russians even claimed to inherit the imperial mantle of Byzantium. According to a popular theory of the sixteenth century, Moscow was the world's third Rome: the first Rome had fallen to Germanic invaders in the fifth century, and the second Rome, Constantinople, had fallen to the Turks a thousand years later. Moscow survived as the third Rome, the cultural and religious beacon that would guide the world to Orthodox Christian righteousness. Inspired by this theory, missionaries took their Russian Orthodox faith to distant lands. During the sixteenth and later centuries, they brought Siberia into the fold of the Orthodox church, crossed the Bering Strait, and dispatched missions to Alaska and even northern California. Thus, long after the collapse of the eastern Roman empire, the Byzantine legacy continued to work its influence through the outward reach of the Russian Orthodox church.

The Byzantine empire originated as a survivor of the classical era. Byzantium inherited a hardy economy, a set of governing institutions, an imperial bureaucracy, an official religion, an established church, and a rich cultural tradition from classical Mediterranean society and the Roman empire. Byzantine leaders drew heavily on that legacy as they dealt with new challenges. Throughout Byzantine history, classical inspiration was especially noticeable in the imperial office, the bureaucracy, the church, and the educational system. Yet in many ways Byzantium changed profoundly over the course of its thousand-year history. After the seventh century the Byzantine empire shrank dramatically in size, and after the eleventh century it faced relentless foreign pressure from western Europeans and nomadic Turkish peoples. Changing times also brought transformations in Byzantine social and economic organization. Yet from the fifth to the twelfth century and beyond, Byzantium brought political stability and economic prosperity to the eastern Mediterranean basin, and Byzantine society served as a principal anchor supporting commercial and cultural exchanges in the postclassical world. Through its political, economic, and cultural influence, Byzantium also helped shape the development of the larger Byzantine commonwealth in eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean basin.

| C H R O N O L O G Y | |
|---------------------|--|
| 313–337 | Reign of Constantine |
| 325 | Council of Nicaea |
| 329–379 | Life of St. Basil of Caesarea |
| 330 | Transfer of Roman government to Constantinople |
| 527–565 | Reign of Justinian |
| 717–741 | Reign of Leo III |
| 726–843 | Iconoclastic controversy |
| 9th century | Missions of St. Cyril and St. Methodius to the Slavs |
| 976–1025 | Reign of Basil II, the “Bulgar-Slayer” |
| 989 | Conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev to Orthodox Christianity |
| 1054 | Beginning of the schism between the eastern and western Christian churches |
| 1071 | Battle of Manzikert |
| 1202–1204 | Fourth crusade |
| 1453 | Fall of Constantinople |

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