

The Byzantine Empire

The Origins of the Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire was a continuation of the Roman Empire in the East. The Emperor Constantine had founded the capital city, Constantinople, as the capital of the Byzantine Empire. When the Goths seized Rome, this was a great blow to the Roman Empire, but it didn't effectively end it. Although Rome was under the control of foreigners who themselves claimed to be continuing the empire, the Byzantine Empire continued as before, believing *themselves* to be the Roman Empire.

Over the centuries, however, Byzantium evolved into a very different civilization. The Eastern Empire had always had a predominately Greek character, but the Byzantines, through the course of the first millennium AD had to deal with cultural influences and political threats from many European cultures, many Asian cultures and, primarily, the rise of Islam after the seventh century.

Through the later Middle Ages, however, Byzantium both gradually declined politically and became more isolated from the rest of Europe. While the last centuries of the European Middle Ages saw the consolidation of the idea of Europe and the incorporation of European cultures into a larger, overarching European monoculture, Byzantium was left out of this new European concept. By the beginning of the modern period, when "Europe" had become a solid, cultural idea, Byzantine had come to an end in 1453 with the Ottoman Turks and their conquest of Constantinople.

Byzantine history, then, stretches in a continuous line from the latter centuries of Rome to the very beginning of the modern period. It transmitted the classical culture of Greece and Rome but it also developed a unique historical and cultural character based on a synthesis of Greek, Roman, European, and Islamic elements.

1. How do the Byzantines view themselves?
2. How was Byzantium threatened through the course of the first millennium?

Justinian

Most historians consider the reign of Justinian (527-565) as marking a significant break with the Roman past. This is difficult to support—Justinian not only considered himself the emperor of all of Rome, including the territories occupied by the Goths, but also spoke Latin as his primary language.

After the fall of Rome, the Byzantine emperors never thought of reconquering Rome. They did, however, take a lesson from the fall of Rome and all throughout the fifth century, the Byzantine emperors formed a series of administrative and financial reforms. They produced the single most extensive body of Roman law in 425 and reformed taxation dramatically. Most importantly, however, they did not entrust their military to German generals—this had been the downfall of the Latin portion of the empire. They could not, however, maintain a powerful military—the loss of territory in the west had dramatically shrunk their financial resources.

Justinian was perhaps the last emperor that seriously entertained notions of reconquering the west—the institution of the Western emperor fell permanently vacant in 476 and the Byzantine emperors claimed it as theirs. Justinian's expeditions against Italy, however, failed. Although he conquered North Africa and retook Italy from the Ostrogoths, this Gothic War drained the Byzantine Empire of much-needed resources. Most importantly, the Gothic War devastated Italy economically. The economic destruction of Italy was so total that it destroyed Italian urban culture for centuries. The great cities of Roman Empire and her allies would be abandoned, as Italy would fall into a long period of backwardness. The impoverishment of Italy and the drain on Byzantium made it impossible for them to hold Italy—three years after the death of Justinian, the Italian territories fell to Germanic tribes.

1. What lessons did the Byzantine Empire learn from Rome?

2. What are some of Justinian's military successes?
3. Why was it impossible for the Byzantines to hold onto Italy?

Justinian, however, is most famous for the body of laws that he promulgated—the **Corpus iuris civilis**. This was not only a great legal achievement in codifying Roman law; it was also the first systematic attempt to synthesize Roman law and jurisprudence with Christianity. Although Byzantium would eventually fade in influence, from the eleventh century onwards, Justinian's *Corpus iuris civilis* became the foundation of all European law and legal practice (except for England).

Justinian is also credited for founding Byzantine architecture with his building of the Santa Sophia (Hagia Sofia) in Constantinople and the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. The Santa Sophia continued the Roman tradition of building domes, the architecture of the Roman basilica, but it was carried out on a scale unheard of in earlier centuries. In fact, it would remain the largest dome ever built until Sinan built the Selimye Mosque in the sixteenth century. Both Santa Sophia and San Vitale are decorated inside with a uniquely Byzantine mosaic style, a style that was to characterize Byzantine architecture for nearly another millennium. It is a style that fuses both Roman mosaic realism and an otherworldly, almost abstract use of simple forms and dramatic colors.

1. What affect did Justinian's law code have on Europe?
2. What styles are used in Justinian architecture?

The most serious and lasting mistake of Justinian's reign was the persecution of heretical Christians. The eastern empire had always been distinguished from the western empire by the proliferation of religions and metaphysical speculation as a characteristic of religions. This did not substantially change with the advent of Christianity. Although non-Christians were stamped, the eastern Christians engaged in high intellectual speculation on theological and Christological questions with fervor unmatched in the West. You might say that the model of Christian belief in the east was more mystical and philosophical while the Christian belief in the west was more practical and obedience-centered. This meant that a number of competing doctrines circulated in the Greek-centered areas of the Byzantine world.

1. What was the biggest mistake of Justinian's reign?
2. How did the east and west differ on religion?

The Empress Theodora

It was during the Nika revolt that Theodora proved her leadership. Two rival political groups existed in the empire Blues and Greens. Disagreements over religion had further separated them. In January 532, while staging a chariot race, these two groups started a riot. They set many public buildings on fire and proclaimed a new emperor. Unable to control the mob, Justinian and many of his advisors prepared to flee. At a meeting of the government council, Theodora courageously spoke out against leaving the palace. She thought it was better to die as a ruler than to live as nothing. Her determined speech convinced all. Justinian's generals then attacked, killing over 30,000 rebels. Historians agree that her courage saved Justinian's crown.

1. From this short story what do you learn about Theodora?

To women, Theodora may well be considered a noble pioneer of the women's liberation movement. Theodora influenced Justinian's legal and spiritual reforms. She passed on laws prohibiting forced prostitution and established homes for prostitutes, passed rights that granted women more rights in divorce cases, instituted the death penalty for rape and established laws allowing women to own and inherit property. She also provided safe shelter for Monophysite (this is the belief that Christ had only one nature, Divinity, and not two Human and Divine) leaders who faced opposition from the majority orthodox Christians, even though her husband Justinian was an orthodox Christian.

2. How did Theodora help women?