

The Byzantine Empire: A Blend of East & West

BYZANTIUM PRESERVES LEARNING:

Byzantine families valued education and sent their children to monastic or public schools or hired private tutors. Basic courses focused on Greek and Latin grammar, philosophy, and rhetoric. 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 EMPIRE CONFRONTS IT ENEMIES:

Constantinople remained rich and powerful for centuries. After Justinian's death in 565, however, 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. In 542, at its peak, it is estimated that 10,000 people were dying every day. The illness broke out every 8 to 12 years until around 700, when it finally faded out. By that time, it had destroyed a huge percentage of the Byzantine population. The smaller population left the empire exposed to its enemies.



Byzantium's enemies pressed in on all sides. The 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 Anatolia. The Crusades brought armies of knights from Western Europe who pillaged Constantinople in 1204 on their way to fight the Turks.

As their first line of defense, the Byzantines used bribes, diplomacy, and political marriages to prop up their shaky empire. These strategies, however, were not enough. So, in the 7th century, Emperor

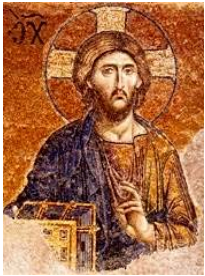
Heraclius reorganized the empire along military lines. Provinces became themes, or military districts. Each theme was run by a general who reported directly to the emperor.

In spite of these measures, the Byzantine Empire slowly shrank under the impact of foreign attacks. By 1350, it was reduced to the tip of Anatolia and a strip of the Balkans. Yet thanks to its walls, its fleet, and its strategic location, the city held out for another 100 years. Finally, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

THE CHURCH DIVIDES:

During those many centuries, the Eastern Church in Constantinople continued to flourish. At the same time, however, distance and lack of contact slowly caused the doctrines and rituals of Western and Eastern Christianity to diverge. The Church would eventually split into the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.

Eastern Christianity built its heritage on the works of early church fathers. One was St. Basil, who, around 357, wrote rules for the life of monks. Another key figure was Saint John Chrysostom (KRIHS-uh-stuhm). As bishop of Constantinople from 398 to 404, St. John was the patriarch (PAY-tree-ark), or leading bishop of the East.



But even the patriarch bowed to the emperor. A controversy that tested the emperor's authority over religious matters broke out in the 8th century. In 730, Emperor Leo III banned the use of icons, religious images used by eastern Christians to aid their devotions. The emperor thought the use of icons amounted to idol worship. The army supported the emperor's view, and enthusiastic **iconoclasts** (y-KAHN-uh-klasts), or "icon-breakers," broke into churches to destroy images. But the people rioted, and the clergy rebelled. In the West, the pope became involved in this eastern dispute and supported the use of icons. One pope even ordered the **excommunication** of a Byzantine emperor—that is, he declared that the emperor was an outcast from the Church. In 843, more than a hundred years after the controversy began, an order from an empress named Theodora restored icons to Eastern churches.

Differences between the Eastern and Western Church, however, continued to grow. In 1054, matters came to a head when the pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other in a dispute over religious doctrine. After this **schism** (SIHZ-uhm), or split, Christianity was permanently divided between the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East.

BYZANTINE MISSIONARIES CONVERT THE SLAVS:

As West and East grew apart, the two traditions of Christianity competed for souls. Missionaries from the Orthodox Church, for example, took their form of Christianity north to the Slavs. Two of the most successful eastern missionaries, Saint Methodius and Saint Cyril (SIHR-uhl), worked among the Slavs in the ninth century. Cyril and Methodius invented an alphabet for the Slavic languages. With an alphabet, Slavs would be able to read the Bible in their own tongues. Many Slavic languages, including Russian, are not written in what is called the **Cyrillic alphabet**.

The Orthodox missionaries opened up highways for Byzantine influence in Slavic lands. As these missionaries were carrying out their work among the Slavs, an important new Slavic nation was forming.



SOURCE: *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal-Littell: 1999, pp. 271-273.