

Byzantium: The 'New Rome'

SETTING THE STAGE:

The western Roman Empire crumbled in the 5th century as it was overrun by invading Germanic tribes. The threat to the empire, however, was already apparent in the 4th century. Emperor Constantine rebuilt the old port city of Byzantium on the Bosphorus strait for two reasons. In Byzantium, he could respond to the danger of the Germanic tribes. He could also be close to his rich eastern provinces. He renamed the city Constantinople and in the year 330, he made it the capital of the empire.

A NEW ROME IN A NEW SETTING:

Constantine planned Constantinople as the new capital of the empire—the New Rome. As a result of his decision, the empire's center of power moved eastward. The eastern provinces then began to develop independently of the declining West. An eastern empire would gradually come into being.

JUSTINIAN—A NEW LINE OF CAESARS:

Because of the difficulties of communication between the eastern and troubled western parts of the empire, they were officially divided in two in 395. Despite this separation, Constantine's successors in the East continued to see themselves as Roman emperors. In 527, a high-ranking Byzantine nobleman named Justinian succeeded his uncle to the throne of the eastern empire....

The new emperor quickly decided to make good on his claim to be the head of the whole Roman Empire—of both eastern and western parts. In 533, he sent his best general Belisarius [beh-uh-SAIR-ee-uhs] to recover North Africa from the Vandals. Belisarius got the job done in a few months. Two years later, Belisarius attacked Rome and took it from the Ostrogoths. But the city was repeatedly attacked by other Germanic tribes. In the next 16 years, Rome changed hands six times. After numerous campaigns, Justinian's armies won nearly all of Italy and parts of Spain. Justinian now ruled almost all the territory that Rome had ever ruled. He could honestly call himself a new Caesar.



THE ABSOLUTE POWER OF THE EMPERORS:

Like the last of the old Caesars, the Byzantine emperors ruled with absolute power. They headed not just the state but the Church as well. They appointed and dismissed bishops at will. The politics, however, were brutal, not spiritual. Emperors lived under constant risk of assassination. Of the 88 Byzantine emperors, 29 died violently, and 13 abandoned the throne to live in monasteries.

BUILDING THE NEW ROME:

A separate government and difficult communications with the West gave the Byzantine Empire its own character—different from that of the western empire. The citizens thought of themselves as sharing in the Roman tradition, but few spoke Latin anymore. Most Byzantines spoke Greek. They also belonged to the eastern branch of the Christian Church.

To regulate a complex society, Justinian set up a panel of ten legal experts. Between 528 and 533, they combed through 400 years of Roman law and legal opinions. Some of those laws had become outdated. Some repeated or even contradicted other laws. The panel's task was to create a single, uniform code for Justinian's New Rome. The result of the panel's work was a body of civil law known as the Justinian Code. After its completion, the code consisted of four works.

1. The *Code* contained nearly 5,000 Roman laws, which the experts still considered useful for the Byzantine Empire.
2. The *Digest* quoted and summarized the opinions of Rome's greatest legal thinkers about the laws. This massive work ran to a total of 50 volumes.
3. The *Institutes* was a textbook that told law students how to use the laws.
4. The *Novellae* (New Laws) presented legislation passed after 534. The Justinian Code decided legal questions that regulated whole areas of Byzantine life. Marriage, slavery, property, inheritance, women's rights, and crimes were just some of those areas. Although Justinian himself died in 565, his code served the Byzantine Empire for 900 years.

CREATING THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL:



While his scholars were creating the legal code, Justinian launched into the most ambitious public building program ever seen in the Roman world. He rebuilt the crumbling fortifications of Constantinople. The city's coasts were ringed by a 14-mile stone wall. The city was also protected on its only land approach by a deep moat and three walls. The innermost of these was 25 feet thick and had towers 70 feet tall.

Justinian saw to it that these massive fortifications were repaired. Church building was the emperor's greatest passion. His beautiful churches also helped him show the close connection between church and state in his empire.

The crowning glory of his reign was Hagia Sophia (HAY-ee-uh soh-FEE-uh), which means "Holy Wisdom" in Greek. A church of the same name had been destroyed in riots that swept Constantinople in 532. When Justinian rebuilt Hagia Sophia, he resolved to make it the most splendid church in the Christian world. Down through the centuries, rich mosaics glittered in the light of a thousand lamps and candles. In fact, more than 400 years after Justinian built his cathedral, the beauty of Hagia Sophia helped convince visiting Russian nobles that their country should adopt Byzantine Christianity.

As part of his building program, Justinian enlarged his palace into a vast complex. He also built baths, aqueducts, law courts, schools, and hospitals. By the time the emperor was finished with his projects, the city teemed with an excitement unmatched anywhere in the eastern and western empires.



CONSTANTINOPLE'S HECTIC PACE:

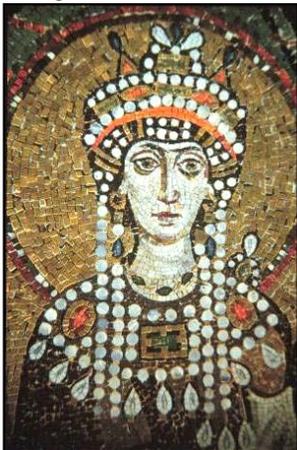
The main street running through Constantinople was the Mese (MEH'see) or "Middle Way." It ran from the imperial complex through a series of public squares and then in two branches to the outer walls.

Merchant stalls lined the main street and filled the side streets. A stone roof sheltered the crowds shopping in this giant open-air market. Products from the most distant corners of Asia, Africa, and Europe passed through these stalls. Shoppers could buy tin from England, wine from France, cork from Spain, and ivory and gold from Africa. Fur, honey, and timber came from Russia, spices from India, and silk from China. Everywhere food stands filled the air with the smell of their delicacies, while acrobats and street musicians performed.

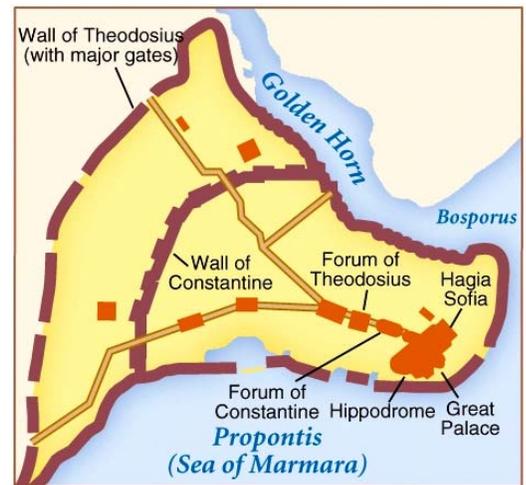
Meanwhile, citizens could enjoy free entertainment at the Hippodrome, which offered wild chariot races and circus acts.

The Hippodrome (from two Greek words meaning "horse" and "track") held 60,000 spectators. Fans of the different teams formed rowdy gangs named for the colors worn by their heroes.

In 532, two such factions, the Blues and the Greens, sparked city-wide riots called the Nika Rebellion (because the mob cried "Nika!" or "Conquer!"). Both sides were angry at the government. They felt the city prefect (mayor) had been too severe in putting down a previous riot of Hippodrome fans. Even though Justinian dismissed the prefect, the mobs were not satisfied. They packed the Hippodrome and proclaimed a new emperor. Belisarius, however, broke in with his troops and slaughtered about 30,000 rebels.



Much credit for saving the day must go to Justinian's wife, Theodora. As her husband's steely adviser, Theodora had immense power. During the Nika rebellion, when Justinian considered fleeing the city, Theodora rallied him with a fiery speech: "My opinion is that now is a poor time for flight, even though it brings safety. For any man who has seen the light of day will also die, but one who has been an emperor cannot endure to be a fugitive. If now you wish to go, Emperor, nothing prevents you. There is the sea, there are the steps to the boats. But take care that after you are safe, you do not find that you would gladly exchange that safety for death."



SOURCE: *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal-Littell: 1999, pp. 269-271.