

CHAPTER 13

THE COMMONWEALTH OF BYZANTIUM

INTRODUCTION

While the western half of the Roman empire crumbled and fell, the eastern half, which became known as Byzantium, managed to survive and, mostly, to thrive for a millennium. During its long history, the Byzantine empire suffered many serious setbacks because of both internal strife and external pressures. Nevertheless, this culture, which blended Roman and Greek traditions, managed to flourish politically, economically, and socially up until the time it began its centuries-long decline culminating in its conquest by the Islamic Ottoman Turks in 1453. Several unique features of the Byzantine civilization contributed to its prosperity:

- A strategically located capital city called Constantinople that was one of the largest, most influential, and cosmopolitan urban centers in the world.
- A highly centralized and autocratic governmental structure consisting of an exalted emperor with an aura of divinity and a large and intricate bureaucracy.
- A rich Christian tradition elaborated by the emperor and the patriarchs that eventually evolved into an independent and separate faith referred to as Eastern Orthodox.
- An unusual and effective administration system whereby generals governed over free peasants who received small tracts of land to work in exchange for military service.
- The extension of Byzantine cultural traditions to eastern Europe and Russia through political, cultural, and economic relations.

OUTLINE

I. The early Byzantine empire

A. The later Roman empire and Byzantium

1. Fifth century, eastern half of empire remained intact while west crumbled
2. Challenges: Sasanids and Germans
3. Highly centralized state
 - a) Emperor with aura of divinity—Caesaropapism
 - b) Large and complex bureaucracy

B. Justinian (527–565 C.E.) and his legacy; Theodora (empress)

1. Rebuilt Constantinople, including Hagia Sophia
2. Codified Roman law *Corpus iuris civilis* (*The Body of the Civil Law*)
3. Sent Belisarius to reconquer the western Roman empire (didn't last)

C. Islamic conquests and Byzantine revival

1. The emergence of the Islamic state, seventh century
 - a) Arab peoples conquered the Sasanid empire and part of Byzantium
 - b) Prolonged sieges of Constantinople by Islamic armies
 - c) Byzantium survived partly because of Greek fire
 2. Byzantine society reorganized
 - a) Provinces (*themes*) under generals
 - b) Armies of free peasants helped agricultural economy
- D. Byzantium and western Europe: ecclesiastical and political tensions

II. Byzantine economy and society

A. Rural economy and society

1. Large agricultural base to support cities
2. Economy strongest when large class of free peasants (*themes*) existed
3. Economy weakened when large landholders consolidated and made peasants dependent

B. Industry and trade

1. Constantinople was major site of crafts and industry
 - a) Glass, linen, textiles, gems, jewelry, gold, and silver
 - b) Silk developed into major industry in sixth century; secrets came from China
2. Constantinople was clearinghouse for trade
 - a) Byzant was the standard currency of Mediterranean basin
 - b) Western anchor of trade route revived silk roads
3. Banks and partnerships supported commercial economy

C. Urban life

1. Housing in Constantinople varied widely by class
2. Attractions of Constantinople: baths, taverns, theaters
 - a) Hippodrome used for mass entertainment
 - b) Chariot races most popular; Greens and Blues rivalry

III. Classical heritage and Orthodox Christianity

A. The legacy of classical Greece

1. Official language went from Latin to Greek
2. State-organized school system trained workforce
 - a) Primary education: reading, writing, grammar
 - b) Later education: classical Greek, literature, philosophy, science
 - c) Higher education in Constantinople: law, medicine, philosophy

3. Byzantine scholarship emphasized Greek tradition
 - a) Wrote commentaries on Greek literature
 - b) Preserved and transmitted Greek thought to later cultures
- B. The Byzantine church
 1. Most distinctive feature was involvement of the emperor
 - a) Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.) in which Arianism was declared heresy
 - b) Iconoclasm controversy (726–843) was started by Leo III
 2. Greek philosophy applied to Byzantine theology
- C. Monasticism and popular piety
 1. Monasticism origins in early Christian ascetics (hermits)
 - a) “Pillar saints” like St. Simeon Stylite
 - b) St. Basil of Caesarea (329–379 C.E.) organized monastic movement
 2. Mt. Athos, monastery in northern Greece from ninth century to present
 3. Monks/nuns very popular with laity
 - a) Provided social services to the community
 - b) Opposed iconoclasm
- D. Tensions between eastern and western Christianity
 1. Constantinople and Rome: strains mirrored political tensions
 2. Ritual and doctrinal differences, such as iconoclasm
 3. Schism in 1054—Eastern Orthodox versus Roman Catholic

IV. The influence of Byzantium in eastern Europe

- A. Domestic problems and foreign pressures
 1. Generals and local aristocrats allied; new elite class challenged imperial power
 2. Western Europe took parts of Byzantium
 - a) Normans in southern Italy and Sicily
 - b) Crusaders carved out states and sacked Constantinople (1204)
 3. Muslim Saljuq Turks invaded Anatolia, defeated Byzantines at Manzikert, 1071
 4. Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, the end of the empire
- B. Early relations between Byzantium and Slavic peoples
 1. Byzantines began to influence Bulgarian politics and culture after the eighth century
 2. Missions to the Slavs
 - a) Saints Cyril and Methodius, mid-ninth century
 - b) Cyrillic writing stimulated conversion to Orthodox Christianity
 - c) Education and religion tied together, led to more conversions

C. Byzantium and Russia

1. Mid-ninth century, Russians started to organize a large state: Kiev
2. The conversion of Prince Vladimir, 989
 - a) Kiev served as a conduit for spread of Byzantine culture and religion
 - b) Cyrillic writing and literature and Orthodox missions spread Byzantine culture
 - c) Byzantine art and architecture dominated Kiev: icons and onion domes
3. Princes established caesaropapist control of Russian Orthodox church
4. Russian culture flourished from eleventh century
 - a) Moscow claimed to be world's "third Rome"
 - b) Sent out many missionaries from sixteenth century on

IDENTIFICATION: PEOPLE

What is the contribution of each of the following individuals to world history? Identification should include answers to the questions *who, what, where, when, how, and why is this person important?*

Procopius

Constantine

Justinian

Theodora

Belisarius

Basil II

Liudprand of Cremona

Arius

Leo III

St. Simeon Stylite

St. Basil of Caesarea

St. Cyril

St. Methodius

Vladimir of Kiev

IDENTIFICATION: TERMS/CONCEPTS

State in your own words what each of the following terms means and why it is significant to a study of world history. (Terms with an asterisk are defined in the glossary.)

Byzantion

Constantinople

Caesaropapism*

*Hagia Sophia**

*Corpus iuris civilis**

Greek fire

Theme

Bezant

Hippodrome

Greens and Blues

Arianism*

Iconoclasm*

Pillar saints

Mt. Athos

Eastern Orthodox Church

Crusades

Battle of Manzikert

Saljuqs*

Ottomans*

Bulgars

Cyrillic alphabet

Kiev

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the story of the monks smuggling the silkworm eggs to Byzantium?
2. What elements did Byzantium inherit from the Roman empire that helped it to survive?
3. Describe the Byzantine form of government.
4. What was the significance of Justinian's *Body of Civil Law*?
5. What were the consequences of the rise of the Islamic empire for Byzantium?
6. What was the *theme* system? How did it work? Why was it so successful? What led to its demise?
7. What economic advantages did the Byzantine empire possess?
8. Trace the development of the Byzantine church to the schism. What caused the schism?
9. What kinds of problems eventually led to the constriction and fall of the Byzantine empire?
10. What was the relationship between the Byzantines and the Slavic people, including the Russians?

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

1. Even though the Byzantine empire fell in 1453 and was in decline for centuries before that, it left a strong legacy behind. What was the most important contribution that Byzantium made to world history? Why is that the most important?
2. The book states that Byzantium was the only classical empire to survive. Why did it survive when all the others did not?
3. What role did geographic location play in the history of Byzantium? What were its advantages and disadvantages?

MATCHING

Match these terms with the statements that follow.

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| A. <i>Theme</i> | E. <i>Bezant</i> |
| B. <i>Iconoclasm</i> | F. <i>Caesaropapism</i> |
| C. <i>Cyrillic</i> | G. <i>Hippodrome</i> |
| D. <i>Arian</i> | H. <i>Byzantine</i> |

1. ___ Coin that became the standard of currency in the Mediterranean for over five hundred years.
2. ___ Site of mass public entertainments in Constantinople.
3. ___ The alphabet created for the Slavic peoples.
4. ___ A person who believed that Jesus had been a mortal human being.
5. ___ An imperial province under the jurisdiction of a general.
6. ___ A form of government whereby the ruler acts as both a secular and religious authority.
7. ___ The belief that creating and venerating religious images is wrong.
8. ___ A modern term meaning "of unnecessary complexity or intricacy."

SEQUENCING

Place the following clusters of events in chronological order. Consider carefully how one event leads to another and try to determine the internal logic of each sequence.

A.

- ___ Emperor Constantine chooses the village of Byzantium as the site of a new capital.
- ___ The emperor Diocletian divides the Roman empire into two administrative units.
- ___ Justinian orders a systematic codification of Roman law.
- ___ Byzantine army is defeated in the Battle of Manzikert.
- ___ Constantinople is conquered by the crusaders from western Europe.
- ___ Constantinople falls to the Ottoman Turks.
- ___ Basil II significantly expands the borders of the empire.

B.

- ___ The patriarch and the pope excommunicate each other.
- ___ The emperor calls the Council of Niceae.
- ___ Iconoclasts abandon their efforts to prohibit the use of images in church.
- ___ Monastic reform movement spreads throughout the Byzantine empire.
- ___ The western pope calls for a crusade to recapture Jerusalem.
- ___ One of the princes of Russia converts to Christianity.

MAP EXERCISES - NEXT PAGE

1. Using the map draw in the three boundaries of the Byzantine empire that are illustrated in the two maps in the text. Then explain the shrinking of the Byzantine empire by discussing the roles that the surrounding states played in the process.

2. Study a map of the region and discuss the political, cultural, and economic strategic importance of the location of Constantinople. What other location could Constantine have chosen for his capital that would have been advantageous? Why?

CONNECTIONS

In fifty words or less, explain the relationship between each of the following pairs. How does one lead to or foster the other? Be specific in your response. (May be done individually or in small groups.)

- Eastern Orthodoxy and Greek philosophy
- Byzantium and silk
- Constantinople and the "third Rome"
- Seljuqs and crusaders
- *Theme* and Islam

FILMS

Byzantium (1997). *The Lost Empire*, Discovery Home Video.

Hail Caesar, vol. 6, *Justinian*. A&E.

MEDITERRANEAN AREA

