

## The Byzantine Empire: The Empire of New Rome

The Byzantine Empire was the successor of the Roman Empire in the East. While the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 AD, the Byzantine Empire in the East lasted another 1,000 years. Its people never called themselves “Byzantines”; they considered themselves *Rhomaioi*, or Romans, and they traced their history back to the beginning of the Roman Empire. The Byzantine Empire is given a different name and considered different than the preceding Roman Empire because the Byzantines had a few major differences from their Roman predecessors: most importantly, they were Christians and spoke mainly Greek instead of Latin.

### *Constantine the Great and the Beginning of Byzantium*

It is a matter of debate when the Roman Empire officially ended and transformed into the Byzantine Empire. Most scholars accept that it did not happen at one time, but that it was a slow process, and so late Roman history overlaps with early Byzantine history.

Constantine I (“the Great”) is usually held to be the founder of the Byzantine Empire. He was responsible for two major changes that would help create a Byzantine culture distinct from the Roman past. First, he legalized Christianity, which had previously been persecuted in the Roman Empire. He converted to Christianity, and sponsored the Christian Church. Christianity would be a major feature at the heart of Byzantine culture. The second major step taken by Constantine was moving the capital of the Roman Empire to the city of Byzantium (the origin of the word “Byzantine”), which he refounded as the city of Constantinople (it was also sometimes called “New Rome”). Constantine’s founding of Constantinople in 330 AD is usually considered the beginning of the Byzantine Empire. By moving the capital of the empire outside Italy and to the East, Constantine moved the center of gravity in the empire to this region, right on the divide between Europe and Asia Minor.

After Constantine, few emperors ruled the entire Roman Empire. It was too big, and under attack from too many directions. Usually, there was an emperor of the Western Roman Empire ruling from Italy or Gaul, and an emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire ruling from Constantinople. While the Western Empire was overrun by Germanic barbarians the Eastern Empire thrived, and Constantinople became the largest city in the empire and a major commercial center.

In 476 AD, the last Western Roman Emperor was deposed and the Western Roman Empire was no more. Its lands in Italy were conquered by the Ostrogoths, Spain was conquered by the Visigoths, North Africa was conquered by the Vandals, and Gaul was conquered by the Franks. This left the Eastern Roman Empire as the only Roman Empire standing.

### *Justinian I and the Reconquest*

In 527 AD, Justinian I came to the throne in Constantinople. He dreamed of reconquering the lands of the Western Roman Empire and ruling a single, united

Roman Empire from Constantinople. He sent his general, Belisarius, to Africa with a small army. Belisarius successfully defeated the Vandals and claimed Africa for Constantinople. Next, Justinian sent him to Italy, to conquer it from the Ostrogoths. Belisarius defeated the Ostrogoths in a series of battles, and reclaimed Rome. Soon most of Italy was in Justinian's hands. He sent another army to conquer Spain.

Justinian also undertook many important projects at home. Much of Constantinople was burned down early in Justinian's reign after a series of riots called the Nika riots, when angry racing fans became enraged at Justinian for arresting two popular charioteers (though this was really just the last straw for a populace increasingly angry over rising taxes) and tried to depose him. The riots were put down, and Justinian set about rebuilding the city on a grander scale. His greatest accomplishment was the Hagia Sophia, the most important church of the city. The Hagia Sophia was a staggering work of Byzantine architecture, intended to awe all who set foot in the church. It was the largest church in the world for nearly a thousand years, and for the rest of Byzantine history it was the center of Christian worship in Constantinople. Even some eight centuries later, Ibn Battuta, a Muslim traveler visiting the city, was stunned when he saw it.

Emperor Justinian's most important contribution, perhaps, was a systematized Roman legal code. Prior to his reign, Roman laws had been listed in different regions of the empire, and many contradicted one another. The Romans had attempted to systemize the legal code in the fifth century, but had not completed the effort. Justinian set up a commission of lawyers to put together a single code, listing each law by subject so that it could be easily referenced. Not only did it serve as the basis for law in the Byzantine Empire, but it was the main influence on the Catholic Church's development of canon law and went on to become the basis of law in many European countries. Justinian's law code continues to have a major influence on public international law to this day.

Around 540 AD, Justinian's fortunes began to change. A terrible plague swept through the empire, killing his wife Theodora, and almost killing Justinian. The plague wiped out a huge portion of the empire's population, leaving villages empty and crops unharvested. The army suffered from the plague, too. In Italy, the Ostrogoths waged a guerilla war against the Byzantine occupiers, until they had effectively retaken Italy. Justinian had grown jealous and suspicious of his great general Belisarius, and did not give him the proper resources to effectively fight back. With Justinian's army bogged down fighting in Italy, the empire's defenses against the Persians on its eastern frontiers were weakened. The Persians invaded and destroyed a number of important cities. Justinian was forced to conclude a humiliating peace treaty with them.

Still, Justinian kept the empire from collapse. He sent a new general, Narses, to Italy with a small force. Narses finally defeated the Ostrogoths and drove them out of Italy. By the time the war was over, Italy, once one of the most prosperous lands in the ancient world, was wrecked. The city of Rome changed hands multiple times, and most of the cities of Italy were abandoned or fell into a long period of decline. The impoverishment of Italy and the weakened Byzantine military made it impossible for the empire to hold the peninsula. Soon a new Germanic tribe, the Lombards, came in and conquered most of Italy, though Rome, Naples, and Ravenna remained isolated

pockets of Byzantine control. At the same time, another new barbarian enemy, the Slavs, appeared from north of the Danube. They devastated Greece and the Balkans, and in the absence of strong Byzantine military might, they settled in small communities in these lands.

### *From World Empire to Medieval Kingdom*

Under Justinian's successors, fighting continued against the ravages of the Slavs and Lombards. In this period, the empire became more and more culturally and linguistically distant from the West. After Justinian, Greek gradually replaced Latin as the language of the empire. The one area of the empire that was secure was the East—Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor—but that was about to change. In 602 AD, war broke out with the Persians once again. The Persian army eventually broke through the Byzantine eastern defenses, and conquered Syria and Palestine. In 614 AD, the Christian holy city of Jerusalem fell to the Persians. Soon after, they conquered Egypt, the main food source for the empire.

In the midst of the chaos, Emperor Heraclius came to the throne in a coup. Ruling from 610 AD, he took control of the remnants of the military, and instead of facing the waves of invading Persians, he went around them, sailing over the Black Sea and regrouping in Armenia, where he found many Christian allies. From there he invaded the Persian Empire. By fighting behind enemy lines, he caused the Persians to retreat from Byzantine lands. He defeated every Persian army sent against him, and then threatened the Persian capital. In a panic, the Persians killed their king and replaced him with a new ruler willing to negotiate with the Byzantines. In 628 AD the war ended with Persians defeated.

It took him eighteen years, but Heraclius subdued the Persians. This was a moment of triumph for the Byzantine Empire and Emperor Heraclius. However, like Justinian, he soon experienced a radical reversal of fortune. The Muslim Arabs, inspired by the message of Muhammad, came out of Arabia to wage a war of conquest. After the 26-year-long war, neither Heraclius nor the Persians had enough strength left to oppose them. The lands liberated from the Persians by Heraclius soon fell to the Arabs, and Heraclius died a broken man.

The successors of Heraclius had to fight a desperate war against the Arabs to keep them from conquering the entire Byzantine Empire. The Arab invasions were unlike any other threat the Byzantines ever faced. Fighting a zealous holy war for Islam, the Arabs defeated army after army of the Byzantines, and nearly destroyed the empire. In order to survive and fight back, the Byzantines created a new military system known as the *theme* system. Abandoning the professional army inherited from the Roman past, the Byzantines granted land to farmers, mostly in Anatolia, in exchange for military service. Similar to the feudal system in medieval Western Europe, it differed in one important way: in the Byzantine theme system, the state continued to own the land and simply leased it in exchange for service, whereas in the feudal system ownership of the lands was given over to vassals.

Despite these reforms, the Byzantines continued to fight for survival. In 674, and again in 717, the Arabs besieged Constantinople and came close to capturing the city.

Only a new Byzantine invention known as *Greek fire*—a special concoction that could burn on water and thus be used for naval warfare—saved the Byzantines. In 717, the Byzantines were led to victory against the second Arab siege by a new emperor, Leo III, who founded the Isaurian Dynasty. In the meantime, a new enemy appeared: the Bulgars. A nomadic tribe related to the Huns, they crossed the Danube and settled in Byzantine lands, joining with the Slavs and depriving the Byzantines of their Balkan territories. Leo and his family were capable rulers, but by the time he came to the throne the Byzantine Empire had been reduced from a Mediterranean-wide empire to only Thrace and Asia Minor.

### *Schism in the Church*

Leo III led the Byzantines to major victories against the Arabs, rejuvenating the empire. But he also introduced a new religious policy: Iconoclasm. Iconoclasm was based on the idea that religious images—depictions of saints or Christ or any other holy person—were idolatrous and sinful. The idea may have been inspired by the Islamic beliefs of the empire’s Muslim foes that it was sinful to depict Muhammad or other religious figures. Byzantine supporters of Iconoclasm, called Iconoclasts, claimed that the empire had suffered so many defeats because God was punishing them for worshipping icons. The victories of Leo III and his Iconoclast Isaurian Dynasty over the Arabs seemed to confirm the idea that banning icon worship would regain God’s support of the empire.

The popes in Rome—which was still under the control of the Byzantines—disagreed with Iconoclasm and refused to accept the ban on icon worship. Leo III tried to use military force to compel Pope Gregory II (and later, Gregory III), but his attack failed. Rome and the papacy became more or less independent from Byzantine control. Over time, relations between the popes in Rome and the emperors in Constantinople became even more strained.

In 797, Empress Irene became the ruler of the Byzantine Empire. It was highly unusual for a woman to rule, but she was strong willed and called herself “Emperor” (*Basileus*) instead of “Empress” (*Basilea*). She convened a church council that put an end to Iconoclasm. It was too late to make up with the Church in Rome, however. When Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, saved Rome from a Lombard attack (the Byzantines were too weak in Italy to do anything), Pope Leo III (not to be confused with the Byzantine Leo III) declared him the new Roman Emperor. The pope said that since a woman (Irene) could not legitimately be emperor, he was giving the title to Charlemagne. It was also a message that the popes were now loyal to the Franks, who could protect them, instead of the Byzantines, who had only caused trouble. To the Byzantines, however, this was an outrage, attacking their claim to be the true successors of Rome.

At this point, the Frankish Empire is usually known as the Holy Roman Empire. With two Roman Empires—the Byzantines and the Franks—the authority of the Byzantine Empire was weakened. In the West they were no longer called “Romans,” but “Greeks” (and eventually “Byzantines”). The Byzantines, however, continued to

consider themselves Romans, and looked to the patriarch of Constantinople, not the pope, as the most important religious figure of the church.

In the ninth century a major conflict erupted over the Nicene Creed, the confessional creed of Christianity. The Franks had pushed for a new word to be added. The original creed said that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, but the Franks wanted it to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (*filioque*, in Latin). Since the popes supported the Franks, they made the change, but the patriarch of Constantinople and the Byzantines refused.

In addition, more customary differences arose between the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople. The Western Church forbade priests from having beards, and did not allow priests to marry. The Eastern Church required priests to have beards and allowed them to marry. In the Roman Church, unleavened bread was used in the Eucharist, while in Byzantium leavened bread was used. These were minor differences, but they led to cultural differences in the two churches that became difficult to bridge. Eventually, the Western Church became known as the Catholic Church and the Eastern Church became known as the Orthodox Church, though they would not officially split until 1054.

### *The Byzantine Commonwealth*

With the conflict between the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople (what would become the Catholic and Orthodox Churches), the Byzantines looked to spread their ideas about Christianity closer to home. In the middle of the ninth century, two Byzantine monks who happened to be brothers, known by their monastic names Cyril and Methodius, embarked on a project to convert the Slavs to Christianity. Since the Slavs did not have a system of writing, they had to create one in order to translate the Bible for the Slavs. They created an alphabet, which would later evolve into the Cyrillic alphabet, named for Cyril. They journeyed to what is now Moravia, in the Czech Republic, and preached Christianity. They were opposed both by pagan Slav leaders and by Catholic bishops. In 868, they had to travel to Rome to get the pope's support to continue their missionary work, and Cyril died there. Methodius returned to the Slavs and continued his project of conversion. After he died, however, a new pope came into power and drove Cyril and Methodius's followers from the Slavs.

Still, Byzantine Christianity flourished among the Slavs thanks to the work already accomplished by Cyril and Methodius, and exiled followers of Methodius ended up fleeing to the Bulgarian Empire. They gained influence, converted the Bulgar king, Boris-Michael, and introduced Orthodox Christianity to the populace. Soon the Bulgars would rival the Byzantines in their commitment to Orthodox Christianity. This was the beginning of the Byzantine Commonwealth, a collection of nations united by their shared Orthodox Christian tradition, which brought with it the customs and ideas of the Byzantines. Perhaps the most important group in this commonwealth was the Rus, who later became known as the Russians. Converted to Orthodox Christianity slightly later, in 998, they inherited much of the Byzantine cultural legacy.

## *Imperial Recovery*

In 867, Emperor Basil I founded a new dynasty, the Macedonian Dynasty. It was under this dynasty that the Byzantine Empire would recover and become the most powerful state in the medieval world. This was also a period of cultural and artistic flowering in the Byzantine world.

The time of the Macedonian Dynasty's rule over the Byzantine Empire is sometimes called the Macedonian Renaissance or the Byzantine Renaissance. After a long period of military struggle for survival dominated the life of the Byzantine Empire, the Macedonians ushered in an age when art and literature once again flourished. The classical Greco-Roman heritage of Byzantium was central to the writers and artists of the period. Byzantine scholars, most notably Leo the Mathematician, read the scientific and philosophical works of the ancient Greeks and expanded upon them. Artists adopted naturalistic style and complex techniques from ancient Greek and Roman art and mixed them with Christian themes. Byzantine painting from this period would have a strong influence on the later painters of the Italian Renaissance.

The Macedonian Dynasty also oversaw the expansion of the Byzantine Empire, which went on the offensive against its enemies. For example, Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 912–969 AD), called the “White Death of the Saracens,” pursued an aggressive policy. Before rising to the throne, he had conquered Crete from the Muslims, and as emperor he led the conquest of Cyprus and most of Syria. His successor, John I Tzimiskes, continued the gains against the Muslims, and began a conquest of the Bulgars. He was succeeded in turn by Basil II, called the “Bulgar-Slayer” for effectively wiping out the Bulgar Kingdom and annexing it for Byzantium. For the first time since the reign of Justinian, the Danube was secured as the northern border of the Byzantine Empire. Under Basil II's reign, the Byzantine Empire once again became the most powerful empire in the medieval world.

Basil II was completely devoted to military affairs, and he never married or had children. As a result, when he died, the empire passed to his brother, who also did not have a male heir, but instead had two daughters, Zoe and Theodora. Both married several times, and elevated various men to power as their husbands, and also ruled for a time independently. In the meantime, there was great competition among nobles for governorship of lands in the theme system. Since such governors could collect taxes and control the military forces of their themes, they became independent of the emperors and acted independently, weakening the authority of the emperors. They tended to increase taxes on small farmers in order to enrich themselves, thereby causing massive dissatisfaction.

## *Sharp Decline*

While power struggles dominated Constantinople and the provinces became unruly, an array of new enemies beset the empire. The oppressive taxes by local governors led to a rebellion among the Bulgars. They broke free of Byzantine rule and founded the Second Bulgarian Empire, undoing the success of Basil I. Domination of the Balkans once again slipped from Byzantine hands.

The Bulgars were not the only new threat. The Normans, descendants of the Vikings, arrived in southern Italy around the year 1000 in order to offer their services as warriors. At first they fought as mercenaries for the Byzantines, as well as for their Lombard neighbors. Soon, the Normans settled in Italy and created their own kingdoms. The Norman adventurer Robert Guiscard allied with the pope to drive the Byzantines from southern Italy and replace them with a Roman Catholic Norman kingdom. Guiscard was incredibly successful and he turned his eye to conquering the entire Byzantine Empire. He crossed over into Greece, pillaged the countryside, and defeated the Byzantine army at the Battle of Dyrrhachium in 1081. He died before he could complete his conquests, but southern Italy would never again be ruled by the Byzantine Empire.

Even more dangerous than the Normans was a new enemy from the steppe: the Turks. These former pastoral nomads converted to Islam and ushered in a new phase of Islamic conquests. While the Normans were pillaging Italy, the Turks invaded Asia Minor. Emperor Romanos Diogenes moved the Byzantine army to meet them. At the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, the Byzantine army was totally wiped out by the Turks. It was perhaps the most severe military disaster in Byzantine history. With the Byzantine defeat at Manzikert, Anatolia fell into the hands of the Turks. Anatolia was the heartland of the Byzantine Empire, the home of most of its soldiers and farmers. The defeat at Manzikert meant that the theme system, which effectively supplied Byzantium with its army, was destroyed. The Byzantine Empire was vulnerable to conquest.

### *The Komnenian Dynasty and the Crusades*

In 1081, with the depredations of the Normans and Turks reaching their height, a new emperor, Alexios I, came to the throne. His dynasty, the Komnenian Dynasty, would oversee a restoration of the empire after these disasters. But for the first time, the Byzantines would have to look west, to their estranged fellow Christians in Western Europe. Although Western Europe had religious disagreements with the Byzantines, they realized that the Byzantine Empire was all that was holding back the Muslims from invading Europe. Partly to help the Byzantines, and partly in order to promote Catholic interests and win back Jerusalem, the pope called for a Crusade against the Muslims. Soon armies of soldiers from Western Europe, called “Latins” or “Franks” by the Byzantines, began to march east and stopped in Constantinople. Relations were rocky from the start. To the Byzantines the crusaders were dirty, uneducated brutes. To the crusaders, the Byzantines seemed like untrustworthy, over-pampered schemers. Still, they tried to work together. The Byzantines and crusaders agreed that whatever formerly Byzantine lands the crusaders recaptured from the Turks would return to Byzantine control. The crusaders went back on this agreement, however, and turned the formerly Byzantine lands of Antioch and Edessa into crusader kingdoms, lands ruled by crusader lords. The crusaders succeeded in their goal of conquering Jerusalem, but the Byzantines had come to regard them as just as big a threat as the Muslims.

Still, thanks to the Crusades, the Byzantines were able to reassert control of Anatolia. Emperor Alexios created a new system of leasing land in exchange for military service, called the *Pronoia* system, which was similar to the old theme system.

Under his successors, the Byzantines did not win any major victories, but they were able to keep the Turks out of Byzantium's Anatolian heartland.

At the same time, in order to secure military aid from the Western powers, the Byzantine Emperors had granted financial and trade concessions to the city states of Italy, especially Venice, Pisa, and Genoa. Large numbers of Italian merchants from these cities settled in Constantinople, and thanks to their favorable status they put the local merchants out of business. By 1180, there were around 60,000 of these "Latins" living in Constantinople. Tensions between them and the Byzantines of the city worsened. In 1182, these tensions spilled over into riots and a massacre of Latins living in the city by an angry mob. Tens of thousands were killed.

In 1198, amidst continuing failure by Christian knights to maintain a secure hold on the Holy Land, the pope called a new crusade. Knights from across Europe gathered to invade Egypt and march on Jerusalem. But they needed transportation. They negotiated with the Venetians for ships, but had to give some control of the crusade to Venice in exchange. The Venetian leaders accompanied the crusaders, and directed them to attack enemies of the Venetians. When they arrived at Constantinople in 1204, they found a civil war among the Byzantines. The Venetians instructed the crusaders to help one of the factions in hopes of gaining authority in Constantinople. Tensions between the Venetians and the Byzantines got out of control, especially in the aftermath of the massacre of the Latins twenty-two years earlier. At the same time, the great wealth of Constantinople proved too tempting to the greedy knights. In the end, the crusaders sacked Constantinople. They pillaged the city, carrying away the vast wealth amassed over nine centuries in the Byzantine capital. For this reason, many great examples of Byzantine art can be found today in Venice, especially at St. Mark's Cathedral. The sack was a disaster for the Byzantine Empire, which for all purposes ceased to exist. The crusaders parceled out Byzantine lands among themselves. Constantinople became the capital of a new empire, called the Latin Empire, ruled by Western knights.

### *Byzantium in Exile*

The sack of Constantinople in 1204 was a turning point in Byzantine history, but it was not the end. Several members of the Komnenian royal family had been away from the capital at the time of the sack, and they declared their own successor states. Emperors in Epirus (modern Albania, in the Balkans), Trebizond (on the Black Sea coast in Turkey), and Nicaea (opposite Constantinople on the Bosphorus) all declared themselves to be the rightful Byzantine emperor. These Byzantine successor states fought each other and the Latins in a power struggle for control of the former lands of the Byzantine Empire. It was the Empire of Nicaea, closest to Constantinople, that was most successful.

In 1259, Michael VIII came to the throne of the Empire of Nicaea. He founded the Palaiologos Dynasty, the longest and last dynasty of Byzantine rulers. In 1261, Michael's forces succeeded in capturing Constantinople while the Latin knights were off fighting elsewhere. They found the city a shell of its former self, sparsely populated and largely ruined. Still, Michael VIII returned to the city and was proclaimed emperor there,



marking the restoration of the Byzantine Empire. In order to protect his empire from further attacks by Western knights, he attempted to end the schism between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. This outraged many of his citizens, who blamed the Catholics for the sack of Constantinople. A decisive change had taken place: among the citizens of the restored Byzantine Empire, the “Latins” of Western Europe were more hated than even the Muslims.

### *The Palaiologan Dynasty and the end of Byzantium*

The Byzantine Empire had been restored, but the state of the empire was poor. During the Palaiologan Dynasty, however, the empire experienced a short but vibrant renaissance. As the Palaiologan emperors attempted to restore the glory of Constantinople, they sponsored art and encouraged philosophy. Artists and philosophers looked to the classical past and rediscovered much ancient learning. Although the Palaiologan Renaissance came too late to save the struggling Byzantine civilization, it would be a major catalyst for the Italian Renaissance, especially as Byzantine artists and scholars traveled to Italy to seek shelter from the new threats that besieged the empire.

Indeed, the restored Byzantine Empire was surrounded by enemies. The Bulgarian Empire, which had rebelled against the Byzantines centuries earlier, now matched its strength. Even more dangerous to the Byzantines, the Turks were once again raiding the Byzantine lands of Asia Minor, which had been mostly ignored during the struggle for Constantinople. With the theme system a thing of the past, the emperors relied on foreign mercenaries to supply troops, but these soldiers-for-hire were not always reliable. Michael VIII's successor, Andronikos II, hired an army of Catalan mercenaries from Europe to fight the Turks. The mercenaries defeated the Turks in a number of battles, but also turned against the Byzantine peasants and began looting the Anatolian countryside. When the emperor had the mercenary leader assassinated, the mercenaries crossed over into Greece, allied themselves with the Bulgarians against the Byzantines, and looted Greece. In the meantime, Asia Minor was overrun by the Turks. Anatolia gradually transformed from a Byzantine Christian land into an Islamic land dominated by the Turks.

For a long time the Turks in Anatolia were divided up into a patchwork of independent emirates—small Islamic states. However, one emir, Osman, built up a powerful kingdom that soon absorbed all the others. This was the beginning of the Ottoman Empire, which quickly came to dominate Anatolia. United, the Turks became a much greater threat to the Byzantine Empire.

Even more threats appeared for the Byzantines. A new empire arose in the western Balkans, the Serbian Empire. The Serbian Empire conquered many of the Byzantine lands in the Balkans. Against all these enemies, the Byzantines could only look west in search of aid. The pope, however, continued to stress that help would only come if the Byzantines adopted Catholic Christianity. While the Byzantine emperors were willing to do so in order to save their empire, the populace hated the Catholics for the sack of Constantinople and attempts to reconcile with the Catholic Church only led to riots.

At this point, another theological crisis fragmented the empire. The controversy was over Hesychasm, a mystical Christian movement dedicated to inward knowledge of God. Hesychasm was considered a heresy by many Byzantines, as well as the Catholic Church. A series of Byzantine church councils, however, held that Hesychasm was established as doctrine of the Orthodox Church. This inflamed the bitterness between the Orthodox and Catholics.

While civil war and religious disputes occupied the Byzantines, the Ottomans slowly closed in on the empire. They crossed into Europe and annexed most of the lands around Constantinople. By 1400, the Byzantine Empire was little more than the city-state of Constantinople. The Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos went on a tour of Europe, seeking aid against the Ottoman Turks. He journeyed to France, Germany, Denmark, and even England. While he received some support and a few troops, what he really wanted was a new crusade, a Europe-wide effort to push back the Ottomans and secure Constantinople. It was clear, however, that the only way that would happen was if the Byzantines reconciled with the Catholic Church.

As with the Hesychast controversy, it was clear that this was not acceptable for most Byzantines. A popular saying at the time was “Better the Turkish turban than the Papal tiara.” In other words, the Orthodox Byzantines considered it better to be ruled by the Muslim Turks than to go against their religious beliefs and give in to the Catholic Church. Still, the emperors realized that Byzantium would soon fall without help from the West. In 1439, Emperor John VIII Palaiologos and the most important Byzantine bishops reached an agreement with the Catholic Church at the Council of Florence. The Byzantine Empire would accept Catholic Christianity.

When the bishops returned to the Byzantine Empire, however, they found themselves under attack by their congregations. The agreement to join the Catholic Church was exceedingly unpopular. When John VIII died, he was succeeded by his brother Constantine XI Palaiologos. Constantine XI tried to balance the conflict between a populace unhappy with the union with the Catholics and the empire’s need for help from the West. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks besieged Constantinople. The Catholic powers sent a small amount of aid, but it was not enough. On May 29, 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks, Emperor Constantine XI was killed, and the Byzantine Empire came to an end. Constantinople was transformed into an Islamic city: the Hagia Sophia became a mosque, and the city eventually became known as Istanbul.

### *Legacy*

The Byzantine Empire was gone, but its legacy continued. Within the Byzantine commonwealth, in the states that shared Orthodox Christianity and were strongly influenced by the Byzantines, Byzantine culture lived on. Immediately after the fall of Constantinople, Ivan III of Russia declared Moscow to be the Third Rome, inheriting the Byzantine legacy. The Russian monk Philotheus of Pskov famously wrote, “Two Romes have fallen. The third stands. And there will be no fourth.”

In addition, the Byzantine Empire kept Greek and Roman culture alive for nearly a thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire in the west. It preserved this

cultural heritage until it was taken up in the West during the Renaissance. The Byzantine Empire also acted as a buffer between Western Europe and the conquering armies of Islam. Thus, in many ways the Byzantine Empire insulated Europe and gave it the time it needed to recover from its chaotic medieval period.

The Byzantine Empire has largely been overlooked among historians until recent times, or else considered inferior to its Roman predecessor. The eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon saw its history as one long period of decline, and another historian, William Leckey, commented, “The history of the empire is a monotonous story of the intrigues of priests, eunuchs, and women, of poisonings, of conspiracies, of uniform ingratitude.” However, as we have seen, the Byzantine Empire went through various periods of prosperity and decline, rose to great heights and suffered terrible losses, as it was beset from all sides by a vast array of enemies eager to capture its lands. Only recently have Western historians begun to appreciate the important legacy of the Byzantine Empire.

### Summary:

The Byzantine Empire lasted for over a thousand years, and the above reading is already a condensed summary of its history. However, for the purposes of review, we can divide Byzantine history into several smaller periods, and they will be listed with major events:

- *The Period of Constantine the Great and his successors (c. 300–500 AD):* Constantine founds Constantinople and legalizes Christianity. Christianity becomes the state religion of the empire. The Western Roman Empire falls in 476, leaving the Byzantine Empire as the only Roman state.
- *The Period of Justinian I and his successors (527–610 AD):* Justinian attempts to reconquer the west, he creates the Justinianic code, and embarks on a great building project including the construction of the Hagia Sophia. Plague and military setbacks disrupt his initial successes and leave the Byzantine Empire weak. The Slavs overrun the Balkans and the Lombards invade Italy.
- *The Period of the Heraclian Dynasty and the Arab invasions (610–717 AD):* Despite the great victories of Heraclius over Persia, continued military setbacks cripple the empire. The Muslim Arabs conquer the Persian Empire and the Byzantine Empire’s eastern provinces—Syria, Palestine, and Egypt—and besiege Constantinople on two occasions, nearly destroying the empire. The theme system is instituted.
- *The Period of the Isaurian Dynasty and Iconoclasm (717–842 AD):* Leo III succeeds in halting the Muslim advance, but institutes a new policy of Iconoclasm, the Church of Rome rebels against this policy, Empress Irene reverses the policy, but the pope proclaims Charlemagne the new Roman Emperor in 800 AD. The Byzantine Empire continues to face setbacks.
- *Recovery and the Macedonian Dynasty (842–1057 AD):* Iconoclasm officially ends in 842. Cyril and Methodius bring Orthodox

Christianity to the Slavs and eventually the Bulgars. Basil I founds the Macedonian Dynasty in 867. A cultural renaissance. Military emperors, such as Nikephoros II Phokas, John I Tzimiskes, and Basil II expand the empire to its greatest size since Justinian.

- *Decline and the Komnenian Dynasty (1057–1204 AD):*  
Court intrigue in the wake of the extinction of the Macedonian Dynasty. Bulgars rebel and form a new, rival empire. Normans overrun Byzantine southern Italy and invade Greece. Turks overrun Asia Minor and defeat the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. Alexios I founds the Komnenian Dynasty and leads a recovery. The Crusades are launched and initially help the Byzantines, but soon turn against them. Tensions between Byzantines and Latin merchants. Massacre of Latins in Constantinople in 1182. The crusaders sack Constantinople in 1204.
- *Empire of Nicaea (1204–1261AD):*  
Byzantine Empire in exile after the loss of Constantinople to the Latins. Loss of much of Anatolia to the Turks. Michael VIII founds the Palaiologan Dynasty and recaptures Constantinople. Initial attempts are made to reconcile with the Catholic Church to prevent further attacks from crusaders.
- *Palaiologan Dynasty and the Fall of the Byzantine Empire (1261–1453 AD):*  
Byzantine weakness in the face of Serbian and Bulgarian power in the Balkans and the rise of the Ottoman Turks. Nonetheless, there is a Byzantine cultural renaissance. The Ottomans overrun Anatolia and cross over into Europe. Further attempts are made to reconcile with the Catholic Church in exchange for military aid, but the Byzantine people, angry over the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders, prefer to resist the Turks on their own. The Hesychast controversy widens the chasm between the Catholics and Orthodox even further. The Council of Florence in 1439 reunites the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but it is largely ignored by the Byzantine people. The Ottomans besiege and capture Constantinople in 1453, ending the Byzantine Empire.