

## Introduction

In 324 the Roman Emperor Constantine was very concerned about the barbarian invasions, which were literally at the gates of Rome. So Constantine moved the Empire's capital to a little known Greek colony called Byzance.

As the Western Empire fell apart and disappeared in 476, the Eastern Empire based in Byzance Constantinople survived until 1453. Byzance became the great city of Constantinople. The Eastern Empire or Byzantium founded a rich culture based on the Greek traditions and Christianity. Byzantium has also left us its own story thanks to one of its greatest writers, The greatest of Byzantine writers was the historian Anna Comnena, the daughter of the emperor Alexius.



## Byzantine Conquest - Justinian

- Under one of Byzantium's earliest Emperors, Justinian 527-565, attempts were made to drive the barbarians out from the remains of the Western Roman Empire. Justinian had some successes, as he reconquered the Italian peninsula, the south coast of Spain and parts of North Africa.
- In Italy, in Ravenna, Justinian established his new capital city as a declaration of his ambitions, to rebuild the old Roman Empire.
- In Ravenna he founded a new system of law codes, or Corpus iuris civilis, which are still a basis of many systems of justice in the world today. Justinian legitimised his works of Empire building by patronising the Christian Church. In Ravenna he built chapels like Saint Vitale, and ordered craftsmen to make great mosaics to depict the qualities of Justinian's Empire, religion, law and conquest.
- In Byzance itself he had the great Hagia Sophia Cathedral built.

- The Italian peninsula was devastated by Justinian's own invasion, so severely that it was Justinian who prevented a reconstruction of the Roman Empire; not the barbarian invaders.



- Justinian's successes were short-lived, by 700 Arabs, Lombards and Slavs had reduced Byzantium to its original size. Following Justinian's death the Eastern Byzantine Empire was unable to defend its western conquests from fresh barbarian invasions.
- The price of conquest in Italy, Spain and North Africa was crippling for Byzantine finances, and some historians say that this cost was never recovered.
- Justinian's actions gained the Byzantine Empire respect from its foes, and a firm basis for the future, one thousand years until 1453.

## Byzantine Government

Justinian's successor Heraclius I (610-641) was responsible for saving the remains of Byzantium from the ruinous invasions of Persians and Barbarians, as well as sorting out the terrible state of government finances after Justinian's excesses. However, this was also the time of Mohammed and early Islam. Mohammed's followers were already invading deep into Byzantine Syria. Despite these trials, Heraclius I was able to establish a measure of peace and security through good government, but it was Leo the Isaurian (717-741) who was most effective in halting foreign invasions of Byzantium.

While the Byzantine Empire was greatly reduced in size by 1000, it had developed a well organised system of government, a stable administration or civil service, and a fair army. These were three important elements which assured the survival of the Byzantines. The Emperor of Byzantium was no longer called Caesar, but Basileus instead. The power and authority of the Basileus was thought to be absolute, and the Christian Basileus was only responsible to God.

The Byzantine Empire was greatly reduced in size by 1000



## The Schism of Christianity into two Churches - The Orthodox Church

In 1054 the Christian Church was divided into two movements, Catholic and Orthodox. This Schisma (Greek for break or divide,) confirmed the independence of Byzance from Rome. For this schism was a result of several rather complicated factors which alienated the East in Byzance, (Constantinople) from the West in Rome.

- ❖ In 988 Russian and Ukrainian Slavs had converted to Christianity under Prince Vladimir in Kiev, the new Russian Christians had a very different experience of life and spirituality than the older Christians. Their conversion changed the balance of interests among theologians in Constantinople.
- ❖ Between 1000 and 1053, Constantinople and Rome argued over religious matters such as; if Popes in Roman and Patriarchs in Constantinople should be allowed to marry and have families, or if Jesus Christ should be emphasised rather than Christianity's Holy Spirit. The Byzantines emphasised mystical and philosophical spirituality, but the Roman church emphasised the material existence of Jesus Christ and was more practical and obedience-focussed.
- ❖ The most important reason for a rupture was the Iconoclastic controversy in 1053-54. This was a dispute about images, begun by Leo the Isaurian in the period 717-741, when he adopted certain elements of Islamic belief. For the Byzantines and for Muslims, worshipping images in the place of their God and prophets was thought to be wrong. So in 1054 the Byzantine Patriarch accused the Pope in Rome of supporting the worship of images, a grave fault in the eyes of the Patriarch in Constantinople.

These were strong elements for a schism in the Church, but the separation was further confirmed in 1204. The Western Catholic Christians did not always show a lot of respect for their Eastern neighbours. In 1204 Frankish Crusaders were conducting a holy war against non-Christians, following a Byzantine Patriarch's request.

© Open Door Web Site 2001

However, during the Franks crusade they attacked Christian Constantinople for their personal advantage! A consequence of this was that the Orthodox Byzantines became very distrustful of Catholic Western Europe. In 1453 Byzantium became Muslim following its defeat by Islamic Arabia and Persia.

## Background Information

### A. Constantinople: The Great Crossroads

Strange as it may seem the collapse of the Western Empire had immediate beneficial effects on the Eastern Empire. For centuries the wealthy east had been supporting the poor west but after 476 the situation changed dramatically and the Eastern Roman Empire could keep all its riches to itself. But why was the Eastern Roman Empire (which we shall now call the Byzantine Empire) so rich ? If you look at the map below you can see that Constantinople was at the centre of four major trade routes:



#### Explanation of the map

- ❑ to the north lay the Black Sea and what we would now call Russia and the Ukraine. From here came products such as iron, timber and animal furs (especially the very valuable sable).
- ❑ to the west lay the rest of Europe from which Byzantium obtained cereals, wine, flax (to make linen) and animal hides to make leather.
- ❑ to the south lay Africa and especially Egypt. The Nile valley still produced enormous quantities of food as it had done in pharaonic times. It also supplied gold and copper and precious ivory from more southern regions.
- ❑ to the east lay the most important trade route of all. From Arabia came valuable perfumes, from Persia expensive carpets, from India spices and precious stones (especially rubies and emeralds) and from China came silk.

© Open Door Web Site 2001

## B. The Byzantine Empire (395 -1453)

### Introduction

By the beginning of the 4th. century A.D. the Roman Empire seemed as powerful as ever but this was not the case. One of the problems it had to face was its size, it was simply too big for one man, the emperor, to govern effectively. Another problem was that the eastern part of the empire was not only far more populated than the western part but it was also far richer; Rome was the only major city in the west, whereas in the east were found great cities of trade and culture such as Alexandria in Egypt, Haifa and Jaffa in Palestine and Antioch in Syria.

### Constantine the Great

In the year 307 A.D. Constantine became Emperor of Rome and although he was not a Christian (he did convert to Christianity just before his death in 337 A.D.) he was sympathetic to Christians and in the year 312 he decreed that Christians had complete freedom of worship. In 313 Constantine went further and decreed that Christianity was one of the official religions of the Roman Empire.

In addition Constantine decided that Rome was no longer the best place from which to govern this vast empire. He eventually chose the small Greek port-city of Byzantium as the site of his new capital city. This small Greek town was totally reconstructed as an imperial capital city and in the year 330 A.D. Byzantium, now renamed Constantinople became the new capital city of the Roman Empire.

After Constantine's death in 337 every Roman Emperor was Christian (except for the two year reign of Julian the Apostate who continued to worship the old Roman gods). Emperor Theodosius

Theodosius was important for two major decisions:

**A.** In the year 393 he decreed that Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire and that all pagan religions were forbidden. Judaism was tolerated.

**B.** In the year 395 Theodosius finally solved the problem about the size of the Roman Empire very simply; he divided it in two!

This decision by Theodosius created two Roman Empires:

The Western Roman Empire ruled by the Western Roman Emperor from Rome or Ravenna.

The Eastern Roman Empire ruled by the Eastern Roman Emperor from Constantinople

Until 476 the two empires existed side by side but in that year the Western Roman Empire collapsed and western Europe was totally dominated by "barbarian" Germans.

As long as Byzantium kept control of these four trade routes it would remain rich and be able to afford a powerful army and a huge navy to protect the land and the sea. This was the situation in the 6th century especially during the reign of the greatest of the Byzantine emperors; his name was Justinian I (the Great) who ruled from 527 until 565.

### **The First Period of Crisis 565 - 661**

The period immediately after Justinian's death were difficult ones. Continuous warfare had been very expensive and the army was weakened and to make matters worse Byzantium soon found itself at war again this time against its traditional enemy, the Persian Empire to the east.

By 632 the Byzantine Empire had won this exhausting war but desperately needed a long period of peace to get its strength back. It was not to be! Without warning armies of Arab Muslim cavalry swept into the eastern provinces of the empire from Arabia. Within thirty years they had captured half of the territory of the empire and over half the population, including the great cities of Alexandria, Haifa and Antioch-all the land from Egypt to the frontier of Asia Minor was lost to Byzantium for ever. The situation was made more dramatic by the fact that in losing all this territory Byzantium had lost its two most important trade routes , the eastern and the southern.

Although the empire managed to survive it could never recover from these losses.

For a brief period during the 9th. And 10th. centuries a family of emperors (the Macedonian dynasty) did restore a period of prosperity but it did not last.

Between the 11th. and the 15th. centuries Byzantium lost more and more territory and began to lose control of the two remaining trade routes to the Normans and Italians in the west and to the Muslim Turks in the east. The end was inevitable. It came in the year 1453 when the massed armies and warships of the Turkish Sultan Mohammed II Captured the city and deposed the last Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI. The Byzantine Empire had ended the Turkish Ottoman Empire had begun (this Turkish empire would last until 1918).



One of the last great achievements of the Byzantine Empire and one which we can still see today was the conversion of Vladimir Prince of Kiev to Christianity and the introduction of the Greek alphabet into Russia.



## C. Iconostasis

There are three main types of icons which are found in Orthodox churches and in people's homes:-

### Mother of God Hodogetria



This is one of the most common forms of icon. The mother of God is Mary and she is holding the baby Jesus in one arm and pointing to him with the fingers of the other hand. Hodogetria means "showing the way" so Mary is indicating that salvation can only be obtained through her son Jesus. The oldest and most revered icon (it is regarded as a national treasure) is one of this type is called The Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God and was brought to Russia from Constantinople in the early 12th century.

### Kristos Pantokrator



Another very common type of icon is the one shown below. It shows Christ in glory, not the suffering Christ of the western Catholic crucifix but as "Pantokrator" or ruler of the universe.

## The Saints



Icons representing the saints are very common. The one below is an icon of Saint Nicholas, probably the most popular saint in the Orthodox faith. He is not only the protector of children and travellers (especially sailors) he is also the patron saint of Russia.

© Open Door Web Site 2001