

Byzantine Empire Notes

The Roman Empire was divided in 395 A.D. **The Eastern Roman Empire became known as the Byzantine Empire.** The height of this empire occurred in the 500s A.D. It included most of the Balkan Peninsula, Italy, Southern Spain, Asia Minor, Syria and North Africa. It was made up of mostly Greeks but included other cultures as well; this gave the Byzantine civilization an international character.

Constantinople was the capital city of the Byzantine Empire – this city was important because the city was near the center of early Christianity and major trade routes. **Constantine built the city and it was located around the Bosphorus and Dardanelles strait.** This gave the city control of movement in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. **The location offered the city natural protection** – water protected the side open to attack by land.

The Byzantine Empire was seen as the heir to the Roman Empire or a continuation of it.

Near the end of the 300s, Christians formed religious communities called monasteries. **From these communities missionaries visited neighboring people to convert them to the Christian faith.**

From 500-800 A.D. the Byzantine Empire was a brilliant center of civilization. It was divided into a hierarchy of social groups. The family was the center of social life for most Byzantines. Most Byzantines made a living through farming, herding, and working as laborers. **The major Byzantine industry was weaving silk.**

527 A.D. – Justinian takes the throne. He was the son of a prosperous peasant from Macedonia. **He married Theodora, an intelligent and ambitious woman.** He married her in spite of court objections to her occupation; she was an actress – a non-prestigious profession in the empire.

Theodora – actively participated in government and **was especially concerned with improving the social standing of women.** She persuaded Justinian to issue a decree giving a wife the right to own land equal in value to the wealth she brought with her at marriage. In 532, her political talents helped save Justinian's throne.

Justinian brought Roman law to the Eastern Empire. A collection of books known as *Corpus of Civil Law* or the Justinian Code reserved Rome's legal heritage and later became the basis for most European legal systems.

Justinian expanded art and architecture during his reign. **He ordered the construction of roads, fortresses, aqueducts, monasteries, and his famous Hagia Sophia. Hagia Sophia was completed in 537 to symbolize both the Christianity's importance in the empire and the emperor's authority. It represents the Byzantine style of architecture.** Hagia Sophia still remains today.

The Byzantines constantly faced a major threat from the Persian Empire to the east – Justinian was able to keep the Persians at bay and pay tribute to them in exchange for peace.

Justinian strove to restore the Western Roman Empire. In 533, he began the reconquest of the Roman lands that had been taken by Germanic invaders. They conquered the invaders and extended the Byzantine Empire. The reconquest exhausted the empire treasury. Within a generation after his death, many of the conquered lands of the empire were lost.

There was a strong connection between the Byzantine emperor and the church. Emperors and empresses played a major role in church affairs. Justinian strengthened the control of the church and tried to unify the empire under one Christian faith; this sometimes led to persecution of Jews and non-Greek Christians.

After Justinian died in 565, many of the Byzantine lands were conquered by neighboring civilizations. By 700, the empire was reduced to the areas that were mainly Greek.

Both clergy and laity engaged in a religious lifestyle. Discussions or arguments often led to riots and fights. Icons were used in the church and a major dispute broke out in the 700s. Those who objected to the use of icons in worship argued that the Bible prohibited it. Defenders stressed that icons were symbols of God's presence. In 726, Emperor Leo III ordered all icons be removed from the churches. Iconoclasts became the term that references those who support Leo III's decision.

This iconoclastic controversy was one of many disputes between the Western and Eastern empires during this age. By 1054, doctrinal, political, and geographic differences led to a schism, or separation, of the Church into the Roman Catholic Church (West) and Eastern Orthodox Church (East). This split weakened the Byzantine Empire.

The Ottoman Turks attacked the eastern provinces. By the late 1300s, the empire consisted of Constantinople and parts of Greece. In 1453, the Ottoman's laid siege to Constantinople. With the fall of the city, central Europe lay open to attack by Islamic forces. The sultan, Saladin, renamed the city Istanbul. The Byzantine heritage lived on in the civilization developed by the Eastern Slavs.

After the fall of Constantinople, the leadership of the Eastern Orthodox world passed to the Slavs. They were among the largest groups living in Eastern Europe. The Slavs had been in close contact with the Byzantines since the 900s A.D.

One of the Byzantine trade routes ran north across the Black Sea and up the Dnieper River, then overland to the Baltic Sea. From trading posts along the river grew the roots of early Slavic civilization. Much of this land is called the steppe.

The early Eastern Slavs were not warlike. They relied on the Vikings to protect their trade routes. The Vikings also helped lay the foundation for Slavic government.

In about 880 A.D., Prince Oleg conquered the fortress-village of Kiev on the banks of the Dnieper River; this allowed Oleg to dominate the water trade route.

Before the late 900s, the Eastern Slavs honored nature spirits and ancestors, and worshiped many deities. Because of contact with the Byzantine Empire, they were influenced by the Eastern Orthodox Church. Olga became the first member of the Kievan nobility to accept the faith. Her grandson, Vladimir, adopted the new religion.

Yaroslav, son of Vladimir, ruled Kiev during the city's Golden Age. He also organized the Kievan legal system which was based on the Justinian Code. He arranged for his daughters and sisters to marry kings in neighboring countries. After his death, Kiev declined.

Yaroslav had divided his land between his successors rather than naming one heir to control after his death. In 1240, Mongol invaders from Asia captured Kiev and destroyed it.

As the city life in the south declined after the fall of Kiev, many Eastern Slavs moved into the remote northern forests to escape Mongol rule. Moscow was a small prosperous town located near vital land and water routes. The leader of the Orthodox Church in the Eastern Slavic lands was transferred to Moscow and the city was established as a powerful city by 1350. It became the center of the Eastern Orthodox Church after the fall of Constantinople.