The Early Byzantine Empire

Essential Questions

- Who selected the city that became the Byzantine Empire’s capital, and how did his choice impact the empire?
- How did the Byzantine Empire influence the societies of Eastern Europe?
- On what issues did eastern and western Christianity disagree?
- What was Emperor Justinian’s greatest legacy, and why?
- What threats did the spread of Muslim empires pose to the Byzantine Empire?
- How did the Byzantine revival come about?
- How did Western Europeans and Byzantines view each other?
- How did social changes within the Byzantine Empire lead to the decline of its economy?
- How has Byzantine Christianity continued to influence the modern world?

Keywords

bezant
caesaropapism
Cyrillic
Greek fire
icon
iconoclasm
theme
**Set the Stage**

In Ravenna, Italy stands a Roman Catholic basilica of unusual form and history. The Church of San Vitale, which supposedly marks the spot where a Christian martyr met his death, was built while Ostrogoth invaders ruled the Italian peninsula. When the Byzantine emperor Justinian I reasserted the ancient authority of the defunct Roman Empire and reconquered the area, he claimed the church and had it rebuilt according to his fancy. The domed, octagonal brick building with its Romanesque arched windows reflects both Roman heritage and Byzantine influence.

Among the mosaic murals lining the basilica’s interior is a remarkable set that honors Justinian and his wife, the Empress Theodora, as spiritual patrons of the church. The faces of the royal couple are handsome, serene, and pious within their golden haloes. Looking at the serious, authoritative portrait of Justinian, no viewer would guess that the man was a villainous Latin peasant, elevated by chance and royal favor to his position, who used guile freely to advance his plans yet frequently fell prey to the manipulations of others. No one looking at the gracious Theodora of the mosaic would suppose that she was the unscrupulous daughter of a Cypriot circus bear handler, and had made a sordid living as an onstage entertainer and courtesan.

Interestingly, the historian who so reviled the emperor and empress in his “private” history wrote about them in glowing terms in his “official” histories. His negative assessment may well have been as biased as his positive ones. Whatever the truth about their characters, their accomplishments indicate that Justinian and Theodora were intelligent and hard-working as well as ambitious. With the active encouragement and support of Theodora, Justinian produced one of the Byzantine Empire’s greatest legacies to civilization: a legal code that still forms the basis of law in many modern nations.

**The Early Byzantine Empire**

The Roman Empire had created a climate in which a person of obscure birth could rise to dizzying heights. It lent the same opportunity to the small fishing village of Byzantion in the eastern division of the empire. Better known by its Latinized name of Byzantium, it attracted the attention of the Roman emperor Constantine (r. 306–337 C.E.), son of a Roman coruler under Diocletian, by virtue of its strategic location on the Bosporus, a strait that linked the inland Black Sea with the small Sea of Marmara. Another strait known as the Dardanelles connected Marmara to the Aegean Sea and thence to the Mediterranean, giving Byzantium access to the entire maritime trading network of the empire.

Added to this virtue was its placement between Anatolia and the riches of southwestern Asia to the southeast and Greece and southeastern Europe to the northwest. It stood at the crossroads of the empire’s richest trade routes and its
most prosperous yet most unruly sectors. With a new capital city in Byzantium, Constantine reasoned he could enjoy the wealthiest area of his realm while keeping an active eye on his two most formidable military threats: the Sassanid Empire in Persia and the Germanic barbarian states along the Danube River. Accordingly, he moved his court to the village after about 330 C.E., renamed it Constantinople (“Constantine’s city”), and built it into a metropolitan center to match its new name. He spent fortunes in expansive public building projects. He commissioned palaces, baths, museums, libraries, and churches of marble and packed them with luxurious goods and treasures. Over the next two hundred years, Constantinople became the foremost commercial center of the eastern Mediterranean basin.

**The Rising Eastern Star**

As Constantinople grew in prestige and influence, Rome diminished. With resources diluted by the sheer size of the empire, Rome’s emperors chose to fortify its productive eastern areas with a concentration of its military might and the construction of protective walls around Constantinople and other cities. Left relatively defenseless, the less prosperous west—including Rome—fell prey again and again to assaults by migratory Germanic tribes. In 476 C.E., the empire collapsed under the weight of an invasion of the Ostrogoths, never to regain its former preeminence.

The eastern portion of the Roman Empire survived, but in a different form and under a different name in history: the Byzantine Empire. It built on the infrastructure of the old empire—its roads, aqueducts, languages of courtly Latin and common Greek, and governing institutions—but felt no obligations to its republican roots. Instead, the eastern emperors, in the tradition of the late western Roman emperors, kept firm control over all aspects of governmental power. They managed the affairs of the empire with the aid of a huge and complex bureaucracy. Even today, a “byzantine” system of organization refers to a convoluted one, often rife with political intrigues.

To reinforce their governmental primacy visually and socially, the eastern emperors clothed themselves in costly silks dyed purple, a color forbidden by law to any but members of the royal family. They wore crowns heavily studded with jewels. They mandated that even prominent courtiers approach them with three full prostrations and ceremonial kissing of the royal hands and feet—all customs that eventually made their way into later royal courts of Europe and elsewhere. The overall result was an extremely centralized political structure that endured for more than a thousand years.

Power centered in the emperor both politically and ecclesiastically. Constantine, a Christian convert, could not claim the status of divinity as the Roman emperors had, but he made the most of his claim that his rule was divinely approved. Using an approach dubbed **caesarpapism** (see-zuh-roy-PEY-piz-uhhm) by historians, he interceded in church disputes and used his influence to lobby for religious viewpoints he considered correct and against those he considered unorthodox. Nominally, he fostered religious tolerance; in reality, he favored fellow Christians in his political appointments. The ambitious rapidly converted to Christianity and followed the emperor’s lead in using the faith to gain political advantage. The royal favoring of Christianity kept it alive in the Middle East but made it distasteful to
many who held other beliefs—including Jews and, later, Muslims. They came to equate Christian professions with shameless hypocrisy and blatant power grabbing. The greatest challenge for the Byzantine Empire was maintaining its frontiers. When the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire were still united, the Parthians had occupied the region known as Persia before its conquest by Alexander the Great. Parthia had no great interest in cultural flowering, preferring instead to irritate Rome with a strong political and military presence. But in about 227 C.E., a century before Constantine’s move to Byzantium, Parthia fell to the Sassanids, whose great desire was to restore the Persian Empire as it had been at its height. Until the Sassanids in turn succumbed to the tide of Islamic Arab conquest in the seventh century, they pushed continually at the eastern gates of the Roman and then the Byzantine Empire, either with armies or with trade goods, new ideas, and new religions from all parts of the Middle East and even India.

To stave off the military threats, the eastern emperors depended on armies recruited from the Middle East. The soldiers thus had immediate experience in the kind of warfare waged on Byzantium’s troubled fronts. Hellenized Roman citizens from Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere also flocked to Constantinople to vie for government jobs or shares of the brisk international trade, bringing with them their considerable skills. Unlike the western Roman emperors, the eastern ones welcomed the new blood. The vibrant cultural exchange made Constantinople a truly cosmopolitan city. In time, Roman culture came to seem uncouth and even barbaric in comparison. At court, the Latin language assumed a status inferior to Greek and fell into disuse. In every sense, the eastern Roman Empire had transformed itself into the Byzantine, a new empire with its own distinctive identity.

**Byzantine Influence in Eastern Europe**

The Byzantine Empire had to remain vigilant on its northwest border, where Slavic tribes watched constantly for opportunities to expand southward. Whenever the emperor turned his attentions elsewhere, he lost territory to the Serbs and Croats in the Balkan region or to the Bulgars south of the Danube. Finding warfare with these peoples costly, Byzantine emperors responded with a program of careful diplomacy and economic and cultural infiltration. By recognizing the Bulgarian rulers’ sovereignty, they opened the door to intermarriages with them and commercial relations with their people. Soon, Bulgarian royals journeyed to Constantinople for their education, adopted Greek as their courtly language, and set up their government according to the Byzantine pattern.

A key factor in assimilating the Slavic nations into the Byzantine sphere of influence was the government’s sponsorship of missionary work. Two of the most notable of these missionaries, Greek Orthodox brothers Cyril (c. 827–869 C.E.) and Methodius (c. 818–885 C.E.), labored among the Bulgarians and Moravians (in the modern-day Czech Republic, Slovakia, and part of Hungary), where they competed with Catholic missionaries for converts. They later went among the inhabitants of the Balkans and Russia and met with greater success as they opened schools that taught literacy and the Christian faith. Unlike Catholic missionaries, they did not insist on Latin as the liturgical language, which further attracted the people.
The Byzantine Empire placed its irrevocable stamp on Eastern Europe in 989 C.E. with the conversion to Orthodox Christianity of Prince Vladimir I (c. 958–1015 C.E.) of Kiev. The city of Kiev, located in present-day Ukraine, held a commercially vital place in Byzantine trade. It commanded the banks of the Dneiper River—the major trade route between the Nordic Vikings of Scandinavia and Constantinople—and attracted Russian merchants from the east. In fact, Rurik (r. 864–879 C.E.), one of the Norse chieftains, was the one who took control of Kiev in about 855 C.E. and established the Kievan Rus, a loosely organized state dedicated to facilitating this trade. The name Rus may stem from a Greek word for “red,” referring to the reddish hair of so many Norse traders.

Some historians question the sincerity of Prince Vladimir’s conversion due to his rather cavalier remark that he chose Christianity over Islam because it did not forbid alcohol and pork. They also point out that Vladimir had already negotiated for a bride from among the Byzantine imperial family, probably to cement Kiev’s trade alliance with Constantinople. However, his grandmother had earlier converted to Christianity, which probably also affected his decision. When he decided to select a state religion to unify and educate his people in more modern ways, Vladimir investigated both varieties of Christianity and Judaism as well as Islam. He felt drawn to the eastern version of Christianity and sent emissaries to Constantinople to investigate further. Upon hearing their glowing description of the Church of Hagia Sophia, he purportedly had the statue of Kiev’s pagan god thrown into the river. Whatever his reasons for converting, when he accepted Orthodox Christianity and ordered all his subjects to convert, he opened a vibrant new field of labor to the Byzantine missionaries.

In the caesaropapist tradition of the Byzantine emperors, Vladimir and his successors took strong control of the new Russian Orthodox religion. This method of government suited them better than the elaborate bureaucratic structures of Byzantine political organization. Using the ornate, mysterious, ritual-filled mechanisms of the church, they awed the general populace into submissiveness. All the art and architecture of church buildings reinforced the absolute rule of God with earthly princes as his chosen representatives. Literacy with the goal of religious indoctrination so dominated the intellectual scene that scientific and philosophical thought found no toehold for many generations.

**Eastern and Western Christianity at Odds**

Mirroring the mounting political, social, and economic distinctions between western Roman and eastern Byzantine civilization, Catholic and Orthodox Christians found themselves growing increasingly distinct in their beliefs and practices. Both western and eastern churches had translated the scriptures, but the western church adhered to Latin as the only liturgical language, while the eastern church preferred universal Greek and other vernacular languages of the people. Probably not coincidentally, the eastern church tended to deal in theological philosophies and mystical abstracts, for which the Greek language is well-suited. The western church, with its blunt, down-to-earth Latin, preferred a more pragmatic and even formulaic approach to its theology.
Other differences appeared first in minor practices. The western church priests did not wear beards, while the eastern did. The western church insisted on unleavened bread in celebrating Mass; the eastern church used leavened bread. Gradually, the disagreements took on more of a doctrinal tone. Western clergy could not marry at all; in the east, priests could marry before their ordination, though bishops could not. The two churches also disagreed on when to celebrate Christmas and Easter, on the physical and metaphysical natures of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and on exactly what relationship the members of the Trinity bore to each other. Inevitably, these controversies turned sharper in tone as they struck at sensitive points of belief or practice. One of the most troublesome issues involved paintings or figurines of saints. Clergy in the largely illiterate Roman regions considered them mere teaching or devotional aids. In the more literate, urbane Byzantine regions, clerics condemned them as graven images.

The strain grew as matters of jurisdiction came into question. The bishop of Rome, as the successor of the apostle Peter, insisted on his own primacy in Christian leadership. The patriarch of Constantinople disagreed, asserting that each major branch of the church should enjoy autonomy within its own region. The patriarch’s view suited eastern Christianity better, since the emperor actually had the final word on any religious matter. At any rate, the patriarchs of the various branches of the church in outlying areas of the empire could not wait the months or even years it might take for the Roman bishop’s communications to reach them. Eventually, slightly different practices arose in the branches of the eastern church, resulting in the Greek Orthodox church, the Russian Orthodox church, the Church of Jerusalem, and other varying Orthodox denominations of today. Even so, all of them still recognize the seven sacraments known to Catholicism, though they may administer them differently.

The Byzantine emperors formally recognized the bishop of Rome as the first among equals, but they chose to retain their own political control over the eastern church and tacitly disregard the pope’s efforts to standardize doctrine and practice. In terms of practical priority, the primacy naturally fell on the patriarch of Constantinople since he was the cleric in closest communication with the Byzantine emperor. The western church settled doctrinal matters by appealing to the pope and his bishops as the only beings on earth with the authority to interpret scripture. In the eastern church, councils of the clergy from each major branch met to determine doctrine through reasoned discussion, appeals to the writings of the early church fathers and saints, and due attention to the emperor’s opinion. The contradictions between the two methods led only to more friction. Communication between the western and eastern faith communities flagged, and the distinctions between them grew.

**The Byzantine Empire at Its Height**

Still, the eastern empire had not entirely forgotten the western empire. Soon after Rome fell to the Ostrogothic barbarians, one emperor in Constantinople made efforts to reclaim the full grandeur of the Roman Empire. Justinian I (r. 527–565 C.E.), the last Byzantine emperor who spoke Latin as his first
language, had a natural interest in preserving the homeland of his Roman heritage. For a brief time, he succeeded, retaking by military conquest most of the western Mediterranean rim. Even for the prosperous Byzantine economy, the expanded empire cost too much to maintain. Still, it lasted long enough for Justinian to leave his mark on the western empire and the European nations that descended from it.

**The Legacy of Justinian**

The young Justinian's reign did not begin very promisingly. Soon after his ascent to the throne, riots protesting high taxes erupted in Constantinople. At the urging of his wife, Theodora, he put them down by military force, which destroyed much of the city. He rebuilt it with a lavishness that had not been seen since the time of Constantine. The crown jewel of this reconstruction was the Church of Holy Wisdom, or Hagia Sophia, a marvel of both Christian architecture and Byzantine engineering skill. A complex system of half-domes supporting a huge central dome over a vast, open interior consisting of a single room, it suggested both the overarching heavens and the intricacy of the Byzantine governmental support system. Bedecked with silver, gold, and precious gems and hung with lamps, it presented an awe-inspiring sight that impressed worshipers and state visitors alike with the grandeur of the Christian God and the empire that could afford to build such a monument to him. Pilgrims flocked to it and even attributed mystical cures of illnesses to physical contact with its doors and pillars.

The Church of Holy Wisdom, or Hagia Sophia, features the impressive domes, half-domes, and rounded arches of Romanesque architecture. The four minarets date from after the Muslim Turkish conquest of Constantinople, when the church became a mosque.
It still stands, converted first to a mosque and later to a museum, and remains a showpiece of modern Istanbul.

Justinian became known as the emperor who never slept from his habit of rising early and retiring late. He spent most of his waking hours working diligently on state matters, often aided by Theodora. Together, they selected government leaders based on their abilities rather than their social status. One of Justinian’s earliest projects as emperor became a major accomplishment of his reign: the codification of all the laws brought from Rome by Constantine. The four-volume Corpus Iuris Civilis, or Body of Civil Law, had as its basis over four thousand laws first established by the early Roman kings and modified through the periods of the Roman Republic and early empire.

Justinian’s code manifested a distinctly Christian bias. It included laws regulating religion, forbidding heresy, and discriminating against Jews, who had used their favored status under the pagan Roman Empire to denounce Christians. The unusually benevolent protections it granted women, such as the right to inherit property and presumption of innocence until proven guilty, testify of Theodora’s influence. It immediately became the definitive standard of Roman law and was so complete that subsequent emperors never revised it; they simply added anything necessary to the existing code. It unified law throughout the Byzantine Empire and in many later nations of Europe.

In his grandiose scheme to recover the lost glory of the Roman Empire, Justinian used the advantages of a strong economy and his brilliant Greek general Belisarius (c. 500–565 C.E.) to recover former Roman territories on the north African coast, in southern Iberia, and throughout the Italian peninsula and Sicily. He made Ravenna, a later capital city of the Western Roman Empire, his western headquarters, and it benefited from a building program that involved marvelous examples of Byzantine art and architecture. The octagonal, domed Basilica of San Vitale, for instance, contains beautiful mosaics that include portraits of Justinian and his wife, Theodora.

This detail from a mosaic mural in the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy depicts Emperor Justinian I, clothed in royal purple and bearing a platter of bread for the Mass. The large eyes and distinct brows, typical of Byzantine art, give him a serious, intense look befitting the man who codified Latin law for the benefit of the Byzantine Empire.
Justinian Law Code

Justice is the constant and perpetual wish to render every one his due.

The maxims of law are these: to live honestly, to hurt no one, to give every one his due.

In comparison with the ancient Code of Hammurabi, the legal code of Justinian represents a more carefully organized, systematic, and sophisticated approach to law. While Hammurabi merely recorded a list of specific judgments in no particular order, Justinian methodically categorized the laws into titled books and sections for easy reference. Hammurabi justified his list of judgments by citing the divine authority of his position as granted by the gods; Justinian offered no justification other than the longstanding traditions of Roman legal history. Hammurabi’s offering was a strictly practical catalog of punishments appropriate to specific crimes; Justinian’s code examined the theory behind legal judgments.

In the opening statement of Book One of The Institutes, one of the three parts of the Corpus Iuris Civilis, Justinian and his legal scholars offer a definition of justice as “the constant and perpetual wish to render everyone his due.” They then proceed to establish the philosophical purposes of law itself: “The maxims of law are these: to live honestly, to hurt no one, to give everyone his due.” In so doing, they establish law as a set of human obligations rather than a listing of privileges for a few at the expense of many. Although the code refers many times to “natural law,” the point of view that human beings owe respect to one another as equals is likely a legacy of the Roman Republic, influenced by the teachings of Christianity.

Though Justinian’s code, like all legal codes, contains laws that favor certain individuals over others, it states its intent to offer equity to all humanity. This overarching philosophy makes change an easy and natural process of redefinition—theoretically, at least. Once a civilization, as a whole, decides that women, children, minorities, and slaves qualify fully as human beings, the question of whether they deserve the privileges accorded to human beings is already answered. On the other hand, any individual who merits the privileges granted by law must also accept and meet the responsibilities associated with them. For this reason, the delicate balance between justice and injustice often hinges on an individual’s capacity to understand the law, as well as his or her willingness to abide by it. In its masterful definition of justice and its purpose, Justinian’s code provides both the framework and the flexibility necessary to a living, growing, changing body of law.

This time, however, the emperor’s ambitions outran his resources. By spreading his armies so thinly over the old Roman territories in diverse locations around the Mediterranean Sea, he openly invited challenges from the territories’ former overlords. Not even Belisarius could withstand all of them at once. Meanwhile, back in Byzantium, the Slavic tribes to the northwest and the Sassanids to the southeast took advantage of the armies’ deployment elsewhere to make incursions.
into Anatolia and toward Constantinople. To raise and fund new armies to ward off these invasions while retaining his western lands, Justinian exerted himself beyond his strength physically, emotionally, and economically. Following his death in 565 C.E., his successors chose to secure the Byzantine heartland and allow his western conquests to slip away.

If Justinian with all his administrative gifts and idealistic fervor could not restore the Roman Empire, it was indeed gone forever. However, in the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, he indelibly preserved the best of Roman civilization for the guidance and benefit of future nations. His Hagia Sophia still has the power to amaze visitors today in its enshrinement of the Byzantine Empire at its zenith. And, for as long as the basilica in Ravenna stands, the mosaic portrayals of Justinian and Theodora, flanked by representatives of church and state, will symbolize the empire’s other lasting contribution to world history: Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the civilizing influence it had on the Slavic nations of Eastern Europe.

**The Muslim Threat**

A century following Justinian’s death, the Sassanid threat to the Byzantine Empire’s eastern borders completely disappeared. This was not good news, for the
Persians had fallen to a dynamic new force motivated by religious as well as political ambitions. Islam had appeared in the Arabian Peninsula among peoples who sought a theology more satisfying than the tangled web of animism traditional to the area. Because of the politics inevitably associated with Judaism and Christianity, they had resisted both beliefs. Now with a new, homegrown, and monotheistic faith to offer them unity and direction, Muslim Arab armies burst forth from their desert home during the 630s C.E. with a startling degree of fervor.

Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, was a man of peace who taught submission to the will of God. Never had he decreed warfare or conversion by force. However, his followers who aspired to worldly power found ways to harness Islam for their own purposes. The desert-born Arabs soon built a navy that rivaled that of the Byzantines. In quick succession, they overran Sassanian Persia and Byzantine Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, and North Africa, assuming control over Damascus, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and other major centers of Christianity and commerce. In 674, before Constantinople had finished reeling from these costly losses of religious and financial stability, the Arab invaders arrived at the gates of the city and laid siege to it.

Constantinople survived this and other direct assaults by the Muslim Arabs over the next several centuries. In part, the Byzantines succeeded due to their use of Greek fire, a devastating incendiary weapon compounded of sulfur, petroleum, and quicklime that was nearly impossible to extinguish. They floated it on water to surround and burn the wooden Muslim ships and they shot it from the city walls to consume the flesh of Muslim soldiers. Despite these successes in fending off the Arab invasions, the Byzantine Empire had lost many of its most productive agricultural areas and a good deal of its trade income. The nearly constant warfare added new economic burdens: the peasants who composed the empire’s defensive armies could not raise crops while fighting, and they could not pay taxes without income from their crops.

Wherever the Muslim Arabs conquered, they offered polytheists the choice of conversion or death; but they esteemed Jews and Christians as fellow monotheists and students of holy scripture. Even though the Muslim rulers considered Judaism and Christianity to be apostate versions of the true worship of God, they did not insist that Jews and Christians convert. However, as many as two-thirds of the Christian inhabitants of the former Byzantine territories eventually converted to Islam, either from conviction or from caution. The Byzantine Empire never regained most of these lands. Even if it had, it would likely not have regained the loyalty of its former peoples.

**The Great Schism**

On the heels of these religious losses came the greatest loss of all. In 1054 C.E., Sergius, a particularly hard-headed patriarch in Constantinople, gathered together all the old issues that divided the eastern and western churches and voiced them again. Then he added to the mix his denunciation of the western church for its stubbornness. Councils of reconciliation failed utterly. The confrontation ended when the pope in Rome excommunicated the patriarch in Constantinople and all his followers for heresy. In his turn, the patriarch excommunicated the pope and

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Greek fire a highly flammable mixture of petroleum, quicklime, and sulfur used as an incendiary weapon.
all his followers for heresy. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, in all its manifestations, remain separate churches to this day.

For most common Christians, the Great Schism, as it is known, made no difference; they continued to worship as they had before it occurred. But this first major divide underscored the fact that Orthodox Christianity, like so many religions before it, had become a political tool of the state. The popes and Roman Catholic clerics had long resented and resisted the eastern emperors’ efforts to govern the church. They considered the emperors and Eastern Orthodox priesthood a scheming, insincere, worldly lot with too much tolerance for heresy. In their turn, the easterners regarded their western counterparts as rough, uneducated provincials plagued by inflexibility. The breach between them had widened too far to mend, and the primary casualty was the unified Christian church.

The Empire Rebounds

Amazingly, the smaller, more financially constrained Byzantine Empire not only survived the Muslim onslaught for another four centuries but managed to revive some of its former vigor, though not its size. Writing off their losses, the emperors of the eighth century reorganized their political and social system to consolidate and defend the remaining portions of their empire. Using a system of themes, or provinces, they placed generals in military and political charge of the various regions of Byzantine territory. Under close imperial supervision, each general recruited troops from his theme by offering peasants the right to farm areas of land in exchange for military service. Besides being readily available, these troops thus had a personal stake in defending the empire’s lands. The crops they raised in peacetime and the taxes they paid constituted the economic backbone of the empire.

With this new military structure, the Byzantine emperors succeeded in routing the Muslims from Anatolia and fortifying it by the tenth century. They even managed to retake Syria and northern Mesopotamia. Relations with the Muslims regularized to a point that, under Emperor Basil II (r. 976–1025 C.E.), the Byzantine armies could turn their backs on them long enough to secure the empire’s western border, where Bulgaria had begun to make trouble. At the Battle of Kleidion in 1014 C.E., Basil earned the title of “the Bulgar-slayer” by flattening the opposing army. To ensure that the Bulgars never again posed a threat, he ordered fourteen to fifteen thousand captive soldiers blinded in both eyes, leaving only a handful with sight in one eye so that they could guide the remainder home to Bulgaria.

With the Bulgarians subdued, the Byzantine government concentrated ever more resources toward its increasingly successful missionary efforts in the Slavic nations. Converting most inhabitants of the Balkans and Bulgaria to Orthodox Christianity created sympathies stronger than anything the government could accomplish through military might. The conversion of Prince Vladimir I of the Kievan Rus added Russia to the Byzantine sphere of influence. Ambassadors quickly cemented these new, more cordial relations with formal treaties, agreements, and a few royal intermarriages. Further west, Byzantine forces regained control of the southernmost parts of the Italian peninsula from the Arabs, even as they lost Sicily.
to them. Overall, the Byzantine Empire prospered so well during this revival period that Basil II—at that point perhaps the world’s most powerful leader—could afford to waive all taxes for two years.

**Alienation from Western Europe**

Even the period of revival prosperity, though, did not prevent frustration among the eastern emperors when Western Europe, following the lead of the western Christian church, gradually declared its independence from the Byzantine Empire. Rulers of Germanic tribes staked out small empires of their own on land formerly occupied by Rome and still claimed by Constantinople. One of them was a Frank who assumed the name of Charlemagne (c. 742–814 C.E.)—Charles the Great. He persuaded the pope to award him an imperial crown in the year 800 C.E. His empire fell to pieces at his death, but Otto of Saxony (c. 851–912 C.E.) pursued the idea later by declaring an empire of his own and invading Byzantine lands in Italy.

The attitude of western Europeans toward Byzantines in political circles seems to have mirrored that of the ecclesiastical circles. One Liudprand of Cremona (c. 922–972 C.E.), sent from Italy to Constantinople on diplomatic business for Otto of Saxony, preserved in his report a most unflattering physical description of the Byzantine emperor, comparing him unfavorably to pigs and dwarves. He further described Constantinople as a formerly fine city now grown shabby and tawdry. He perceived endless posturing and pretensions in it and in all its inhabitants. About its food, drink, fashions, hospitality, and infrastructure, he had not a good word to say. Other European visitors made similar statements. The Byzantines, on their part, described their western visitors as arrogant, ignorant upstarts unable to appreciate the cultural superiority around them.

**Byzantine Economy, Life, and Culture**

Liudprand obviously wrote from a strong bias against the Byzantines, but his observations probably had some basis in fact. After the death of Basil II in 1025 C.E., the empire entered into a lengthy period of economic decline from which it never recovered. Early in the empire’s history, when invasions of Byzantine lands had broken up the large estates of the aristocracy and allowed the peasantry to buy small parcels to farm, the economy had flourished, allowing Constantinople to support around a million inhabitants. But the Muslim conquest of Egypt deprived the empire of its largest source of grain, and trouble in the Danube region disrupted the supply of grain from that area. Scarcity resulted, especially in the urban areas. To content the urban population, the government strictly regulated food prices, leaving the peasants with no incentive to produce more.

The empire compensated for territorial losses with the theme system, which used the reward of more land to stimulate the peasantry to produce more crops and pay more taxes. The system served well for two centuries but degenerated as the military families in charge intermarried with the local aristocracy. Despite governmental oversight, these small but powerful dynasties accumulated vast land holdings, developed independent tendencies, and occasionally defied the emperor’s authority. The resulting petty wars disrupted the local economy, diverted military service from the interests of the empire to those of the landlords, and left
the peasants with less land to farm and less wealth to tax. Free peasants became an endangered class, increasingly dependent on their aristocratic landlords. Tax revenues and recruitment to imperial military service dwindled along with the food supply, leaving the central government in straitened circumstances.

Fortunately for the empire, its trade revenues remained strong. Constantinople’s strategic position allowed the Byzantine Empire to trade by water from central Asia to Western Europe and from Scandinavia to northern Africa. Its land trade routes extended along the old Silk Road all the way to India and China. A thriving shipbuilding industry and an extensive commercial network of partnerships facilitate trade. Banks also proliferated in the Byzantine capital to help finance merchants. The bezant—a Byzantine gold coin—became the standard currency all over the Mediterranean for over five centuries. And to profit from all this trade, the government regulated it heavily and maintained a large staff of customs officials. Even with all the regulations, merchants had no qualms about trading with the empire’s enemies; only outright war disrupted the near-constant flow, and then only temporarily. A buyer could find anything in Constantinople: Chinese porcelain, Persian carpets, Scandinavian amber, European wool, Egyptian linen, Indian spices, Russian furs, and so on.

Byzantine merchants imported many raw commodities for resale, but Byzantine artisans also contributed to the empire’s international trade by improving on some of these imports before they left the empire’s borders again. They worked gold and silver, cut gems, manufactured glass and jewelry, and dyed and wove wool and linen into cloth. Using silkworm eggs and technology smuggled from China, they began the production of fine silk textiles as well. The government, recognizing the importance of silk technology, regulated it closely and divided up the process among many individuals. To prevent a silk monopoly, no one individual could learn the entire production process.

Only China could rival Constantinople in the number, quality, and desirability of its luxury goods. Many of those commodities went to the homes of wealthy Byzantines. Besides the imperial properties, which employed twenty thousand servants, Constantinople boasted many private palaces and thousands of mansions for aristocrats. More aristocrats populated great estates in the rural areas of the empire, and some maintained both a city and a country residence. In the city, gardens, fountains, sculptures, and lavishly appointed dining halls provided the backdrop for parties and banquet where men drank copiously. Their wives and daughters generally did not attend these feasts. Like Roman matrons and Middle Eastern women before them, they preferred to remain sequestered in their own quarters for the sake of their honor, modestly covering their hair and remaining aloof from all men outside their own households. Interestingly, even as aristocratic Byzantine women largely withdrew from society, women in the imperial family tended to rule alongside their husbands—or, in some cases, in place of their husbands. Justinian’s wife, Theodora, seems to have set this precedent of women as capable rulers. Another royal Theodora (981–1056 C.E.) coruled with her sister Zoë after a popular uprising unseated Zoë’s emperor husband.

Other urban dwellers lived in less desirable circumstances than the aristocracy. Heavy government regulation prevented merchants from accumulating much
wealth or political influence, so they and their families usually lived like artisans in fairly modest quarters above their offices and shops. Clerks and government workers resided in multistory apartments, while lower-class laborers and the poor inhabited tenement areas with common kitchens and latrines. However, most urbanites had sufficient money to enjoy—occasionally, at least—the many public baths, taverns, restaurants, and theaters, or to attend the chariot races, circuses, and sporting contests at the Hippodrome’s stadium arena.

Hippodrome sports divided the city’s populations into two factions, known as the Blues and the Greens. In their earliest days, these rival factions rallied around their preferred chariot drivers or gladiators as fans. Later, they carried their rivalry into political life by seeking to lobby the emperor for favors. At one point, soon after Justinian I began his reign, they joined forces in a riot against high taxes and tried to depose the young emperor. At the urging of Theodora, Justinian sent Belisarius and the army to quash the rebellion. Thousands of rioters died that day, but the Blue and Green factions survived. Their rivalry mellowed as the centuries went on, and they gradually assumed the role of civic clubs whose leaders held places at court.

The imperial government bureaucracy was by far the largest employer in Constantinople. Aspiring governmental employees from every societal class (though most came from the aristocracy) underwent a rigorous education in classical Greek, science, and philosophy. They specialized in various governmental niches, ranging from diplomacy to trade regulation to oversight of provincial affairs. In true Byzantine style, the government also employed an intricate network of spies to discourage corruption and antigovernmental plots. Church clergymen received as intense an education as civil workers since the church was essentially the religious arm of the government.

Constantinople gradually deteriorated under the weight of so many people and so much regulation. Later visitors from Western Europe confirmed Liudprand’s assessment of it as a filthy, squalid metropolis built upward so high that many of its streets lay in perpetual darkness, inviting thieves to rob and murder at will. Its international trade left it unusually vulnerable to major epidemics of illness, including the bubonic plague. It depended on trade rather than native ingenuity for its technological advances, so it often seemed behind the rest of the world developmentally. Western European nations surpassed the Byzantine Empire in part because their farmers took early advantage of new agricultural technologies that increased crop yield, while Byzantine farmers doggedly continued their traditional methods.

One area in which the Byzantine Empire excelled, however, was that of cultural expressions. While brothers Cyril and Methodius pursued their missionary work among the Slavs, they adapted from Greek characters a script that expressed the unique sounds of Slavic languages, giving them a written language for the first time. Cyrillic characters remained in use among the Slavic nations for centuries and are still the standard script in Russia and some other former Soviet nations today. With the new writing system as their primary tool, Eastern Orthodox missionaries established schools in the Balkan states, Moravia, and eventually Kiev.

**Cyrillic** a set of written characters derived from Greek to represent the sounds of Slavic languages; developed by and named for Cyril, a Greek Christian missionary to the Slavs
From these institutions, literacy, Orthodox religious teachings, and Byzantine culture flowed forth. Won over by the schools, the Slavs gradually discarded old religious traditions and came to embrace Christianity with true fervor. Alongside it, they accepted such aspects of Byzantine civilization as literature, art, and architecture. Newly literate scholars and priests wrote religious narratives and expositions in Cyrillic characters. Churches sprang up everywhere, built of wood but resembling onion-domed models in Constantinople. **Icons**, popular religious works of art that depicted divine figures and Christian saints, proliferated in every home, rich or poor. These beautiful portrayals, arresting in their richness of color but static simplicity of form, influenced art as far west as Gothic Europe.

**The Enduring Influence of Byzantine Christianity**

The Christianity of the Byzantine Empire owed as much to classical Greece as to the early apostles. The writings of the apostles that constitute the New Testament today were all originally Greek manuscripts. After the Byzantine court switched from Latin to Greek as its primary tongue, many Byzantine scholars never took the time to learn Latin. Instead, they studied Greek philosophical treatises and considered Christian doctrine in their light. Considering themselves the cultural heirs of the ancient Greeks, they assiduously safeguarded any Greek writing, whether pagan or Christian.

Greek learning acted as the foundation for all Byzantine education. Both boys and girls attended state-sponsored schools that taught reading, writing, and grammar in Greek. Even military men, peasants, and lower-class urbanites who never formally attended school received the basics of literacy at home, for both trade and governmental service demanded a literate population. Those who continued into higher education studied classical Greek literature, including history and the works of the pagan philosophers. The university at Constantinople taught law, medicine, and philosophy as interpreted by the Greeks. Most of the Greek literature that survives today comes from manuscripts produced or preserved in the Byzantine Empire.

So pervasive was the classical Greek heritage that many Byzantines worshiped the pagan gods as late as the sixth century C.E. In 528 and 529, Justinian I had to pass laws mandating Christian baptism throughout the empire and forbidding pagan preaching in Athens. Still, clerics and scholars based all their Christian studies on the classical Greek philosophies taught to them in school. Byzantine Christianity took on a flavor entirely different from that of the less-Hellenized western reaches of the Roman Empire. For this reason, many western Christians considered the eastern church leaders heretical.

Compounding the problem, eastern emperors felt it appropriate to interject themselves into church discussions of beliefs and use their influence to sway doctrinal opinion. The first eastern emperor, Constantine, summoned church clergy to the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. to discuss Arianism—the theory of the Christian priest Arius (250–336 C.E.) that Jesus was a mortal human being, a creation of God, and not coequal with him. Although the emperor had originally favored Arianism,
he came to believe otherwise and personally visited the council to argue against it. The council, strongly influenced by Constantine’s personal opinion, ruled against Arianism and excommunicated Arius and his followers. Based on this precedent, the eastern emperors developed their practice of caesaropapism—dominance of the church by the government—and treated the church as an instrument of state. Clerics resented imperial decrees of Christian beliefs and orders that church sermons include support of state policies, but many of them had received their prominent leadership positions by imperial favor and did not dare voice their opposition.

Even emperors can exceed unspoken limits, however. When an eighth-century emperor declared that religious wall paintings and icons amounted to idols and began a policy of iconoclasm to destroy or efface them, the common people rebelled. For a period of over a hundred years, riots and protests erupted throughout the empire as lay Christians fought to keep their icons. Supporting them in this matter were many members of the lower clergy and monastic orders. At length, a later emperor withdrew the policy, and the trade in icons flourished again.

Support from local monastic orders meant a great deal to the lay Byzantine Christians. The prominent clerics with their esoteric theological theories did not impress them as much as the holy hermits and ascetics who demonstrated their commitment to fasting, prayer, and celibacy by perching on the tops of pillars for years on end. Their pious example led many Christians to leave worldly life and possessions behind to join communal orders. Urged by Basil of Caesarea (329–379 C.E.), these groups eventually adopted sets of rules and dedicated themselves to service and prayer. Several well-known Basilian monasteries still exist on Mount Athos, a peninsula in a harsh, windy coastal region of northern Greece. For the past ten centuries, the monks have allowed no female, either human or animal, access to the peninsula.

Unlike the monastic orders of the western church, the eastern ascetics such as those at Mount Athos have concentrated on meditation and mystical experiences with God rather than education and study. However, they continue to support the lay communities around them with spiritual counsel on demand and physical relief during times of disaster. The respect they have inspired among Eastern Orthodox Christians has helped to hold the faith together over the centuries since the Byzantine Empire that fostered it vanished into history.

**Summary**

Constantine’s choice of the village of Byzantium for his new imperial capital enabled him to tap the rich agricultural resources of his empire, monopolize international trade, and protect its most unstable borders. By sending Christian missionaries to convert and educate the troublesome Slavic societies to the north, the Byzantine emperors drew them into the civilized Byzantine sphere of influence. However, the emperors’ use of the church as a governmental division antagonized Christians in the western part of the empire. Emperor Justinian codified Roman law for the use of the Byzantine Empire, and his code continues to benefit law in many nations today.

Islamic invasions cut deeply into Byzantine territory and weakened the agricultural portion of the empire’s economy. The emperors rallied the economy by offering...
peasants the incentive of more farmland in exchange for military service. Meanwhile, relations with Western Europe worsened, resulting in more losses of Byzantine territory and the Great Schism of the Christian church. Changes in Byzantine society caused further decline of the agricultural economy, and consequently, the government. However, the positive influence of Orthodox Christianity grew and is still active today.

Looking Ahead

When eleventh-century Western Europe, led by the Normans, entered a period of strong economic development, Byzantine fortunes fell still further. A Norman invasion late in that century expelled the Byzantines from their Italian holdings forever. On the eastern borders, nomadic Turks, led by the Muslim Saljuqs, took advantage of the empire’s distraction to invade Anatolia and secure it during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Under the pretext of religious crusades to liberate holy Christian sites from Muslim rule, twelfth- and thirteenth-century Normans and other Western Europeans formed armies that seized remaining Byzantine lands and even sacked Constantinople itself.

Deprived of its economic breadbasket, the fragmentary Byzantine Empire limped slowly downhill for another two and a half centuries, easy prey for anyone who chose to attack it. When, in 1453, the Ottoman Turks took Constantinople and its surrounding lands, they dealt it a merciful death blow. But even in death, the Byzantine legacy outshone that of the empire that replaced it. Among its living memorials are the civilizations of Slavic Europe, the legal codes of the Western world, Orthodox Christianity, and a wealth of unique art and architecture.

SELF-CHECK ANSWERS

1. Kiev lies on the Dneiper River, which was the major trade route between the Nordic Vikings of Scandinavia and Constantinople.

2. Pilgrims attributed mystical cures of illnesses to physical contact with the doors and pillars of the Church of Hagia Sophia.

3. Muslims esteemed Jews and Christians as fellow monotheists and students of holy scripture and so did not force them to convert to Islam.

4. Charlemagne (Charles the Great) persuaded the pope to award him an imperial crown over much of Byzantine-claimed Western Europe in the year 800 C.E.

5. The Byzantine Empire depended on trade rather than native ingenuity for its technological advances, so it usually adopted change later than the rest of the world.

6. Many members of the lower clergy and monastic orders supported Orthodox Christians in their desire to keep their icons.
Unit 2, Lesson 11