



Byzantine Empire history

The **Byzantine Empire** (Eastern [Roman Empire](#)) was one of the longest-lasting [empires](#) in history. At its height in the [medieval period](#), it was the most sophisticated and wealthiest empire in [Europe](#). These erudite Greek-speaking people were the guardians of [ancient](#) classical civilization until the Empire's collapse, and they considered themselves true Romans until the end.



Byzantine Empire Flag

Once a Roman imperial backwater, the small city of Byzantium was chosen by Rome's first Christian emperor, **Constantine the Great**, to be his new capital. It would be renamed Constantinople after the emperor, and Constantine would decorate his city



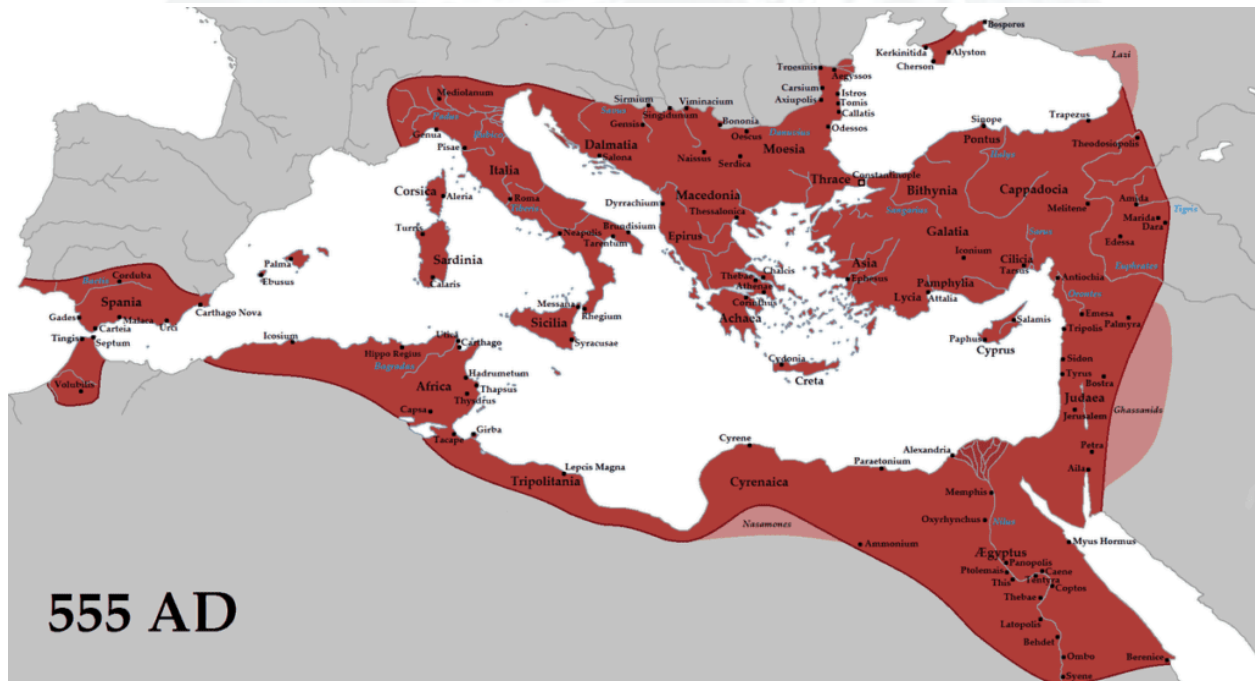
with magnificent treasures from across the Roman world. Constantinople was also chosen for its incredible defensive position, situated on the Bosphorus strait and surrounded by water. When wave after wave of barbarian invaders appeared on the Danube border in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, Rome was sacked twice.

Byzantine Empire Facts

Time Period	330 to 1453
Religion	Christianity
Capital	Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul
Currency	Solidus, denarius, and hyperpyron



Byzantine Empire Map



Map of Byzantine Empire, 555 AD

Constantinople and the Eastern provinces, however, were protected by a combination of geography and diplomacy. Two emperors ruled the Roman empire at once during this period, and the wealthier Eastern Roman emperor played for time by paying off some of the Barbarian invaders. While temporarily free from invasion, the East was fortified. Constantinople was not easy to attack at the best of times, and soon, Theodosius II gave it near-impenetrable walls. Multiple barbarian groups struggled to undermine the Eastern capital, and even Attila the Hun, the so-called “scourge of God,” ultimately avoided it.

The Politics of Roman Memory in the Age of Justinian



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Constantine's strategic masterstroke would prove highly effective, and the eastern half of the empire would hold out for another thousand years. While the West completely collapsed into a series of barbarian successor kingdoms, starting the European Dark Ages, Byzantium would have its first golden age in the 6th century AD.

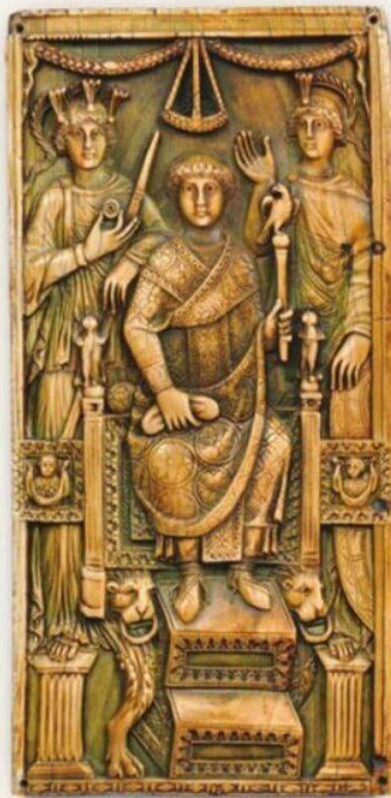
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THE POLITICS OF ROMAN MEMORY

From the Fall of the Western Empire
to the Age of Justinian



Marion Kruse

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By 500 AD, Constantinople had half a million inhabitants, and the city was filled with baths, a popular racetrack, and many churches and grand public buildings. In 527, the



ambitious Emperor Justinian I would take the throne, embarking on a lengthy campaign of reconquest in an attempt to restore the Roman empire to its former glory. He was highly successful and would recapture swathes of North Africa, part of Spain, and the whole of Italy. With the money garnered from his conquests, he reshaped the city of Constantinople with many spectacular building projects.

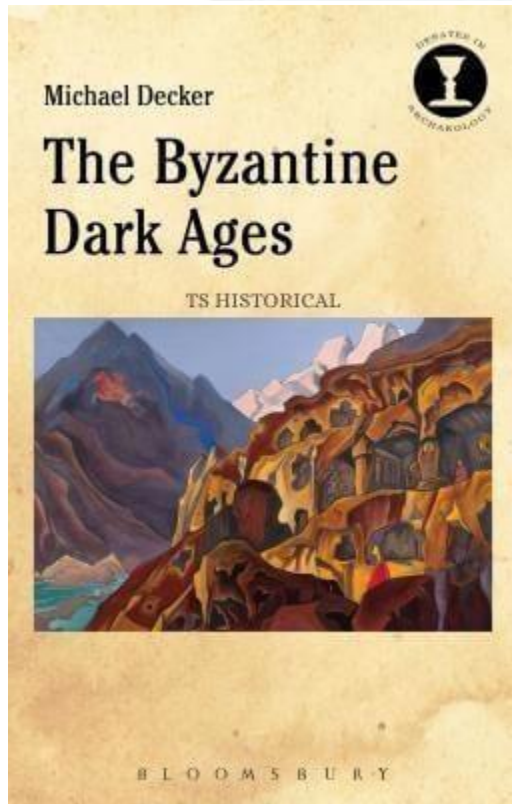
The iconic cathedral, the Hagia Sophia, was built during his reign, and nobody would be able to replicate its enormous dome again until the renaissance. Justinian was a great emperor, but after his death, his attempts at restoration would crumble, and the empire would quickly lose most of its Spanish, African, and Italian possessions once again.

Byzantium would go through a period of a protracted war with the neighboring Sassanid Persian Empire, during which time they lost large areas of land in the East. Byzantium's next great emperor, **Heraclius I**, came to the throne in 610 and would have a long and difficult reign in which he steadily restored Byzantine territory in a heroic series of campaigns. However, his victories were short-lived, and towards the end of his life, his success was ripped from him. In the Arabian Peninsula, the **prophet Muhammad** had just died in AD 632.

Muhammad's successors would embark on one of the most staggeringly successful campaigns of conquest in history, and the now weakened **Persian Empire** would be crushed by the advance of the new Muslim caliphate, which then immediately turned on the Byzantine Empire. In less than a century, the Muslim **Umayyad Empire** would spread all the way from central Asia to northern Spain. All Heraclius' good work was undone in one fell swoop, and Byzantium now faced a new tougher nemesis.



Byzantine Dark Ages



Byzantine Dark Ages

The late 7th and early 8th centuries are sometimes known as the **Byzantine Dark Ages**, as the empire struggled for its survival against this new military juggernaut. Convinced that God was punishing the Byzantine Empire, the 8th-century Isaurian military emperors would reform the army to great effect, but they would also introduce a new religious policy, known as iconoclasm.

The Bible's Old Testament warns against the use of graven images, but since the time of Justinian, icons depicting the saints had become a popular form of religious worship. Ideas about the power of icons varied hugely, but some people believed they had



quasi-magical powers. During the Persian siege of Constantinople in 626, The armies of the faithful had held up an icon of Mary on the walls, which was later rumored to have saved the city. Convinced that such beliefs were blasphemous, several Byzantine emperors purged religious imagery across the empire in a protracted and controversial internal religious struggle. Thankfully, the iconophiles would ultimately win the theological argument about the use of images. Icons were restored for good by Empress Theodora, and icon veneration is still an important part of the Greek Orthodox church today.

Once this religious controversy was put to bed, the Byzantine Empire would bounce back with renewed vigor. Basil I, a hardy peasant soldier, founded the powerful **Macedonian dynasty** in 867. This period is sometimes known as the Macedonian Renaissance because Byzantine art and learning started to flourish. Icons and mosaics from this period are stunningly beautiful and awash with gold leaves. Knowledge was also collected and systematized.

The Empire's borders began to expand again, guided by various competent military commanders. Chief among these was Emperor **Basil II**, known as the "**Bulgar Slayer**." He would push Byzantine power northwards into the Balkans, taking on the powerful **Bulgarian empire**.

The Byzantines would also fight off the Kievan Rus in this period. A major naval assault by **Russian** ships was defeated with the Byzantine's now regularly- used secret weapon, a substance known as "**Greek Fire**." This napalm-like concoction burned on water and was used from the 7th century onwards in a flamethrower-like device to destroy enemy ships. The "Wildfire" used in the TV Show Game of Thrones is based on the historical use of this deadly weapon.

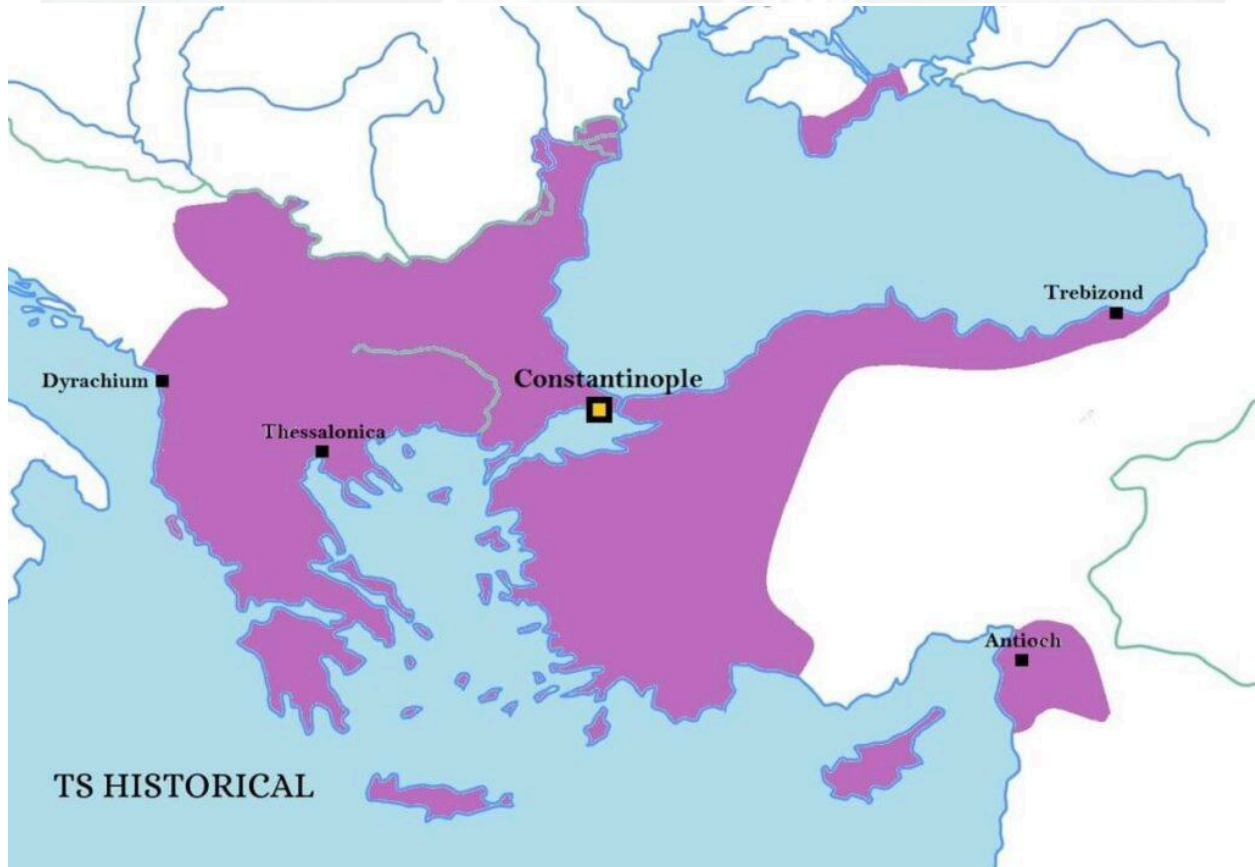
The Rus were eventually converted to Christianity after prolonged contact with the Greeks, and the Russians developed an alphabet based on Greek – the Cyrillic script – in order to write their own Bible. The power of the Greek church at this time would solidify a growing split between the papacy in the West and the Greek Orthodox church. Another consequence of the contact with Russia was that many Scandinavian Vikings living in the Rus would travel to Byzantium to become part of the emperor's elite



Varangian Guard – a tradition that would continue for many centuries. Viking runic graffiti is still visible scratched into the stonework of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

Byzantine Empire under the Komnenos Dynasty

In the 10th century, the Byzantine Empire was now at its height, and once again, it incorporated parts of Italy, as well as much of the Balkans and Armenia. Aside from their northern foes, the Byzantine's main nemesis in this period was the powerful Muslim **Abbasid Empire**, the architects of **the golden age of Islam**.



Byzantine Empire under the Komnenos dynasty



The contact between these two empires would create conflict but also a fruitful interchange of ideas. A flowering of literature and science would result, and both were indebted to the Byzantine Empire's large libraries of **ancient Greek** and Roman texts. This golden age would not last long, and by the 11th century, the empire was in trouble again. The more warlike Seljuk Turks overran the enlightened Muslim Abbasid Caliphate.

The **Komnenos Dynasty** would be inaugurated in this period after a series of ineffectual rulers failed to protect the Byzantine heartlands from the new threat. The Turks were not interested in peaceful compromises and began harrying the Byzantines, reversing the delicate balance of power in the Near East. They conquered lands in Anatolia and got perilously close to the Byzantine capital itself. To make matters worse, Western European Norman adventurers were spreading across Europe on missions of personal conquest. They would expel the Byzantines from Italy and become just as much of a nuisance as the Turks.

In 1054, the Eastern and Western churches had formally excommunicated each other after centuries of conflict, but the Empire was in peril; Emperor **Alexius I** Komnenos turned to the Pope for aid. He knew that the western Christians could no longer go on religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem while the **Seljuk Turks** controlled the area, so he asked for help on their behalf. These events would lead to the preaching of the crusades by Pope Urban II. The Pope argued that the faithful would go to heaven if they took the cross and aided the Byzantine Empire's eastern Christians.



Byzantine Empire under the Angelos Dynasty



Byzantine Empire under the Angelos dynasty

The **First Crusade** was ultimately a success and temporarily created the western Christian states of Outremer in the Levant. Much of the Byzantine land was restored, and the empire was hopeful once again. Wealth flowed into Constantinople from trade with the Crusader states, and the now stable **Komnenos Dynasty** would produce several great emperors, including the wonderfully wise **John II**, nicknamed the "**Byzantine Marcus Aurelius**." With the end of the Komnenos dynasty came the Byzantium period of terminal decline.

A coup d'état replaced the incompetent **Alexius II** with the **Angelos Dynasty**, which failed to deal effectively with a new series of military crises in the Balkans and Anatolia, as well as an invasion by **William II** of Sicily. Finally, during the Fourth Crusade, many western knights arrived in Constantinople to help the son of a deposed Byzantine



emperor retake the throne. They successfully seized the city, but when the now-restored emperor and his son did not pay their western backers in a timely manner, the crusaders sacked Constantinople in 1204.

The crusaders and their Venetian supporters stole most of the city's riches and carved the empire up between themselves. Byzantium was obliterated and continued only as a series of small Greek successor states which were surrounded by western crusader kingdoms and Italian territories. However, against all odds, the Byzantines would have one last revival.

The Fall of Constantinople in 1453

In 1261, Emperor **Michael VIII** Palaiologos (of the Greek Kingdom of Nicaea) would recapture Constantinople and reunited parts of Greece and Anatolia. Unfortunately, this briefly-resuscitated Byzantine Empire was very short-lived. The entirety of the 1300s saw a power struggle between the invading Serbs, the **Ottoman Turks**, and the Italian city-states over the Byzantine's meager dominions. Territories passed back and forth between many groups, but ultimately,

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Byzantine empire fall, when Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II launched an attack on Constantinople

The Byzantine heartland got smaller and smaller. By the 15th century, the Byzantine Empire's only dominions were small parts of Greece, a scattered collection of small islands, and the countryside around Constantinople. Finally, in 1453, the Ottoman **Sultan Mehmed II** launched an attack on Constantinople with hopes of making the city his capital.

Constantinople was still a tough nut to crack, but fortunately for the Sultan, a Hungarian inventor offered him the use of several enormous canons, which were capable of



breaking through Constantinople's near-impenetrable walls. The Byzantines had missed an earlier opportunity to claim the invention for themselves after turning the inventor away. They would pay for it with their lives. Constantinople was promptly captured and transformed into Muslim Istanbul.

The Eastern Roman Empire had finally fallen after many centuries of unity. Although gone, the Byzantine legacy would endure. Refugees from the Empire would take classical Greek and Roman texts west, and Greek artists would introduce new artistic techniques to Italy. The death of this creaking empire would ultimately help to spark the renaissance, and Western Europe would flower due to Byzantium's destruction.

People Also ask?

How did byzantine empire start

The Byzantine Empire started in 330 AD when the Roman emperor Constantine I moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Byzantium

What if byzantine empire never fell

It could have grown into a big competitor in Europe, challenging both the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church

How byzantine empire ended

Byzantine Empire fall in 1453 when the Ottoman Empire fateh Constantinople