

# The Byzantine Empire

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**A Resource to Accompany**

*History Alive! The Ancient World*

***TCi***

Teachers' Curriculum Institute

# Introduction

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In Chapter 37, you learned how the emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to the ancient city of Byzantium in 330 C.E. This city eventually became known as Constantinople. After Constantine's reign, power was usually divided between two emperors. One was based in Rome, and one in Constantinople.

After the fall of Rome, the eastern half of the empire continued for another 1,000 years. Today we call this eastern empire the Byzantine Empire, after Byzantium, the original name of its capital city. This great empire straddled two continents, Europe and Asia. It lasted from about 500 to 1453 C.E., when it was conquered by the Ottoman Turks.

East and west did remain connected for a time through a shared Christian faith. But the church in the east developed in its own unique way. It became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church. Over time, Byzantine emperors and church officials came into conflict with the pope in Rome. The conflict eventually led to a permanent split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

In this reading, you will learn about the Byzantine Empire, one of its greatest emperors, and its distinctive church. Let's begin by exploring the empire's capital—the fabulous city of Constantinople.

# Constantinople

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**C**onstantinople was more than 800 miles to the east of Rome. Why did Constantine choose this site to be the capital of the Roman Empire?

One reason was that the site was easy to defend. It was surrounded on three sides by water. The Byzantines fashioned a chain across the city's harbor to guard against seafaring intruders. Miles of walls, fortified by watch-towers and gates, made invasion by land or sea difficult.

Constantinople also stood at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and the many sea and overland trade routes linking east and west. Under the Byzantines, this location helped make the city, and some of its citizens, fabulously wealthy. For more than 700 years, Constantinople was the richest and most elegant city in the Mediterranean region. Ivory, silk, furs, perfumes, and other luxury items flowed through its markets. A French soldier who saw the city in 1204 exclaimed, "One could not believe there was so rich a city in all the world."

At its height, Constantinople was home to around one million people. The city's language and culture were Greek, but traders and visitors spoke many languages. Ships crowded the city's harbor, loaded with goods. The city streets, some narrow and twisting, some grand and broad, teemed with camel and mule trains.

Life in Constantinople was more advanced than in western Europe. The city boasted a sewer system, rare in medieval times. Social services were provided by hospitals, homes for the elderly, and orphanages.

Despite the luxuries enjoyed by the rich, many people lived in poverty. The emperor gave bread to those who could not find work. In exchange, the unemployed performed such tasks as sweeping the streets and weeding public gardens.

Almost everyone attended the exciting chariot races at a stadium called the Hippodrome. Two chariot teams, one wearing blue and the other green, were fierce rivals. In Constantinople and other cities, many people belonged to opposing groups called the Blues and Greens after the chariot teams. At times the rivalry between Blues and Greens erupted in deadly street fighting. But in 532, the two groups united in a rebellion that destroyed much of Constantinople. You'll find out what happened in the next section.

## Questions

1. Why was Constantinople ideally located to be the capital of the Byzantine Empire?
2. What were some of Constantinople's main features?
3. What was daily life like in Constantinople?

# The Reign of Justinian I

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One of the greatest Byzantine emperors was Justinian I, whose long reign lasted from 527 to 565. But Justinian's reign nearly came to an abrupt end much sooner. In January 532, the emperor and his beautiful wife, Theodora, were attending the chariot races at the Hippodrome. In the past, Blues and Greens at the races had often fought with each other. This time, however, both groups were upset over the arrests of some of their members. To Justinian's horror, they united in denouncing him. Fighting broke out, spilled into the streets, and escalated into a full-scale rebellion.

The rioting continued for a week while Justinian and Theodora hid in the palace. Much of the city was in flames. Justinian's advisors wanted him to flee the city. Theodora, however, urged him to stay and fight. With her encouragement, Justinian put down the revolt. According to the official court historian, Procopius, 30,000 people were killed in the fighting. Constantinople lay in ruins.

Justinian was determined to rebuild the city on an even grander scale than before. He put huge sums of money into public works. Soon Constantinople had new bridges, public baths, parks, roads, and hospitals. The emperor also built many grand churches, including the magnificent Hagia Sophia ("Holy Wisdom"). Today this great cathedral is one of the most famous buildings in the world.

Besides rebuilding Constantinople, Justinian tried to reclaim some of the empire's lost territory. He launched military campaigns that, for a time, won back parts of North Africa, Italy, and south-eastern Spain.

Justinian is most famous, however, for creating a systematic body of law. Under his direction, a committee studied the thousands of laws the Byzantines had inherited from the Roman Empire. They revised outdated and confusing laws. They also made improvements, such as extending women's property rights. The result of their work is known as Justinian's Code. It became the basis for many legal codes in the western world.

Procopius, the court historian, wrote glowing accounts of Justinian's achievements. But he also wrote the *Secret History*, in which he called the emperor "a treacherous enemy, insane for murder and plunder." Throughout Byzantine history, distrust and divisions often plagued the imperial court. Justinian's court was no exception.

## Questions

1. What event forced Justinian to start rebuilding parts of Constantinople?
2. What were some of the improvements made to Constantinople as a result of Justinian's public works projects?
3. How has Justinian's Code affected the modern world?

# The Eastern Orthodox Church

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**T**o the Byzantines, Christianity was more than a religion. It was the very foundation of their empire.

When Constantine built his new capital, he intended it to be the religious center of the empire as well as the seat of government. Constantine himself tried to settle religious disputes by calling bishops together in council.

Over time, the Byzantine church became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church. The word *orthodox* means “in agreement with right belief.” The medieval Eastern Orthodox Church was based on a set of beliefs that its leaders traced back to Jesus Christ and to the work of bishops in early Christian councils.

## **The Role of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Empire**

Religion and government were more closely linked in the Byzantine Empire than in the west. The Byzantines viewed the emperor not just as the head of the government but as the living representative of God and Jesus Christ. This meant that church and state were combined into one all-powerful body.

The state religion also united people in a common belief. The Eastern Orthodox Church played a central role in daily life. Most people attended church regularly. Religious sacraments gave shape to every stage of the journey from birth to death. Monasteries and convents cared for the poor and the sick. These institutions were supported by wealthy people and became quite powerful. Let’s look at some of the practices of Eastern Orthodoxy.

**Church Hierarchy** Like Roman Catholic clergy, Orthodox clergy were ranked in order of importance. In Byzantine times, the emperor had supreme authority in the church. He chose the patriarch of Constantinople, who ranked next to him in matters of religion. Unlike the pope in the

west, the patriarch did not claim strong authority over other patriarchs and bishops. Instead, he was “first among equals.” The patriarch of Constantinople (which today is Istanbul, Turkey) still holds this honor.

Orthodox priests served under patriarchs and other bishops. Unlike Roman Catholic priests, who were not allowed to marry, many Orthodox priests were married. Bishops, however, could rise only from the ranks of unmarried clergy.

**Liturgy and Prayer** The Orthodox church service corresponding to the Roman Catholic mass was the Divine Liturgy. Both the clergy and worshippers sang or chanted the liturgy. The liturgy was conducted in Greek or in the local language of the people.

Orthodox Christians also prayed to saints. Two saints were particularly important in Byzantine times. Saint Basil promoted charity and reformed the liturgy. Saint Cyril helped create the Cyrillic alphabet, which allowed scholars to translate the Bible for people in eastern Europe to read.

**Architecture and Art** Christian faith inspired magnificent works of architecture and art in the Byzantine Empire. With its square base and high dome, Hagia Sophia served as a model for many Orthodox churches. The architecture of the church also reflects Orthodox views. The simple base represents the earthly world. Upon it rests the “dome of heaven.” Rich decorations on the inside were meant to remind worshippers of what it would be like to enter God’s kingdom.

Building on the Greek love of art, the Orthodox church used many images in its services and prayers. Byzantine artists created beautiful icons, which were usually painted on small wooden panels. Artists also fashioned sacred images as mosaics and painted them in murals.

An image of Christ as the Pantocrator, or ruler

# The Eastern Orthodox Church

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of all, gazed down from the dome of all Orthodox churches. Christ was usually shown holding a gospel and giving a blessing. Most churches also placed an icon of Jesus' mother, Mary (called the Theotokos, or god-bearer), and the Christ child over the altar.

Many Byzantines believed that sacred pictures helped bring them closer to God. But icons also became a source of violent disagreement, as you will see next.

## Questions

1. What was the relationship between religion and government in the Byzantine Empire?
2. How did the Eastern Orthodox Church play a central role in the daily life of Byzantines?

# Conflict Between East and West

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**M**edieval Europe and the Byzantine Empire were united in a single faith, Christianity. Over the centuries, however, cultural, political, and religious differences brought the two parts of the old Roman Empire into conflict.

The two regions had been quite different even in the days of the old Roman emperors. The eastern half of the empire had many cities, much trade, and great wealth. The western half was mostly rural and agricultural, and not nearly as wealthy.

Other differences became more pronounced after the fall of Rome. Byzantine culture was largely shaped by its Greek heritage. The west was influenced by Frankish and Germanic cultures. In Constantinople, people spoke Greek. In the west, Latin was the language of scholars, diplomats, and the church.

Perhaps most important was the conflict that developed between the churches of east and west. After the fall of Rome, popes gradually emerged as powerful figures in western Europe. The popes claimed supreme religious authority over all Christians. The emperors and patriarchs of the east resisted such claims.

Other differences added to the conflict. Let's look at three major disagreements and how they led to a split in the Christian church.

**Iconoclasm** The first major disagreement concerned religious icons. Many Christians in medieval times used images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints in worship and prayer. Some Christians in the east, however, believed that people were wrongly worshipping the icons themselves as if they were divine. In 730 C.E., Byzantine emperor Leo III banned the use of religious images in all Christian churches and homes.

The policy of iconoclasm ("icon smashing") led to the destruction of much religious art. Throughout Christian lands, people cried out in protest. In Rome, popes were angry because Leo's order applied to parts of Italy that were under Byzantine control. Pope Gregory III even excommunicated the emperor.

The Byzantine Empire lifted its ban on icons in 843. But the dispute over iconoclasm had caused a major split between the east and west. It also helped drive popes in Rome to look for support and protection against enemies.

**The Crowning of a Holy Roman Emperor** Another major disagreement occurred in 800 C.E. At the time, Empress Irene was the ruler of the Byzantine Empire. Because she was a woman, Pope Leo III did not view her as a true ruler. More important, the pope needed the protection of a strong leader to help defend the church in the west.

Leo decided to crown Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, as Holy Roman emperor. The pope's action outraged the Byzantines, who felt that they were the rightful rulers of the Roman Empire.

**The Final Break** Matters between east and west came to a head in 1054. The patriarch of Constantinople, Cerularius, wanted to reassert Byzantine control of the church. He closed all churches that worshiped with western rites. Pope Leo IX was furious. He sent Cardinal Humbert to Constantinople. The cardinal marched up to the altar of Hagia Sophia. In front of everyone, he laid down a bull (a proclamation by the pope) excommunicating Cerularius.

# Conflict Between East and West

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Cerularius responded by excommunicating the cardinal. This was only a symbolic act, for the patriarch did not have that power. But it showed that the split, or schism, between east and west was complete. Despite future attempts to heal the division, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church were now separate churches.

## Questions

1. Why did Byzantine emperor Leo III forbid the use of icons in 730? How did the pope react to Leo's order?
2. What event in 800 increased tensions between the east and the west?
3. How did the relationship between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church change in 1054?



# Summary and Processing Assignment

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## Summary

In this reading, you learned about the Byzantine Empire and the Eastern Orthodox Church. After the fall of Rome, the eastern half of the Roman Empire lived on with its capital at Constantinople. Today it is referred to as the Byzantine Empire. Destroyed by rioting in 532, Constantinople was rebuilt by the emperor Justinian I.

The Byzantine Empire was a Christian state. The Eastern Orthodox Church was at the center of daily life and inspired great art and architecture.

Byzantine emperors and patriarchs clashed with popes in Rome over a number of issues. These disagreements led to a schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

## Processing Assignment

Create a real estate advertisement to encourage people to move to Constantinople after the schism of 1054. Your advertisement must include these elements:

- a memorable slogan
- a map that shows where Constantinople is located
- four paragraphs of information about the city's geography, government, religion, and daily life
- four visuals that represent key ideas in the written information
- extra creative touches that make the advertisement look authentic
- writing that is free from spelling and grammatical errors

# Guide to Questions

## Constantinople

1. Why was Constantinople ideally located to be the capital of the Byzantine Empire?

*Constantinople was easy to defend and it lay at the crossroads of many sea and overland trade routes linking east and west.*

2. What were some features of Constantinople?

*Constantinople was surrounded by water on three sides and fortified by walls with watch-towers and gates. A chain protected the mouth of its harbor. The city had a sewer system, hospitals, homes for the elderly, and orphanages.*

3. What was daily life like in Constantinople?

*Life in Constantinople was more advanced than in western Europe. The city's language was Greek, but visitors spoke many languages. Most people lived in poverty. Many people attended chariot races. The emperor gave bread to the unemployed, who did public works in exchange.*

## The Reign of Justinian I

1. What event forced Justinian to start rebuilding parts of Constantinople?

*Much of the city was ruined when fighting in the Hippodrome escalated into a rebellion.*

2. What were some of the improvements made to Constantinople as a result of Justinian's public works projects?

*New bridges, baths, parks, roads, and hospitals were built. The Hagia Sophia was also built.*

3. How has Justinian's Code affected the modern world?

*Justinian's Code is the basis for many legal codes in the western world.*

## The Eastern Orthodox Church

1. What was the relationship between religion and government in the Byzantine Empire?

*Religion and government were closely linked. The emperor was believed to be both the head of the government and the living representative of Jesus Christ.*

2. How did the Eastern Orthodox Church play a central role in the daily life of Byzantines?

*Most people attended church regularly and received sacraments at every stage of their lives. Monasteries and convents cared for the poor and sick.*

## Conflict Between East and West

1. Why did Byzantine emperor Leo III forbid the use of icons in 730? How did the pope react to Leo's order?

*Leo III believed that people were wrongly worshipping the icons themselves. Pope Gregory III excommunicated the emperor.*

2. What event in 800 increased tensions between the east and west?

*In 800, Leo crowned Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, as Holy Roman emperor. This outraged the Byzantines, who felt they were the rightful rulers of the Roman Empire.*

3. How did the relationship between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church change in 1054?

*In 1054, a schism, or formal division, resulted in the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church becoming two separate Christian churches.*