
Revising the History: The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire

As the western portion of Rome had fallen into the hands of invaders, mostly those of Germanic tribes, the Eastern portion eventually began to thrive. Eastern provinces began to develop independently of the declining west. The eastern and western portions of what had been known as Rome, were officially separated in 395. However, eastern emperors still considered themselves Roman. In 527, a man named Justinian took the throne. In 533, his general Belisarius was sent to reconquer areas. He recovered Northern Africa from the Vandals took Rome from the Ostrogoths. After multiple campaigns, Justinian's armies had won nearly all of Italy and parts of Spain. By this time, Justinian had reconquered almost all of the land that the Roman empire had once encompassed.

What also separated the eastern portion from the western portion of Rome, was the use of a common language- the Greek speaking, eastern portion, and the Latin speaking, western portion. The east also belonged to the eastern branch of the Christian church, while the west remained Roman Catholic.

In the years of 528 - 533, under the rule of Justinian, a uniform law code was being set up by review of former Roman laws. A panel, consisting of 10 legal experts, was set to complete the task. When finished Justinian's code, as it was called consisted of 4 parts (The Code, The Digest, The Institutes, and The Novellae). After Justinian's death in 565, the law code still continued to serve empires for 900 years.

During Justinian's reign, the Byzantine Empire reached its height. The city of Constantinople was rebuilt with walls of protection also built around it. Justinian's greatest passion however was the building of Churches, such as the marvelous Hagia Sophia. As a part of his building program, Justinian built baths, courts, hospitals, and aqueducts. Justinian also built schools as education was well valued in Byzantine society.

When Justinian died 565, the empire fell under chaos. There were many revolts, religious disputes, street riots, and invasions. Another issue was famine. Justinian had died from a disease from what we know as the bubonic plague. There had been frequent outbursts of the disease in Constantinople, usually occurring every 8 to 12 years, killing a large portion of the population. The smaller population that had been left was more open to invasion. Invaders from Russia and Persia as well as Arabic armies, and Lombards attacked the empire. As the Turks took over the Muslim world, they slowly began to move their way into Anatolia. The Turks defeated the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert 1071, coming closer to the city of Constantinople than the Arabs or Persians had ever come. In attempt to reduce invasions emperor Heraclius reorganized the empire among military lines, with provinces becoming military districts. The downfall of the empire continued and was finally taken over by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

During the years of turmoil, many religious quarrels had taken place. There were multiple controversies between emperors and religious leaders, which lead the the schism or splitting of

the Church. The east developed Orthodoxy and the west under Roman Catholic Orthodoxy. This had been an effect of a pope and patriarch who excommunicated each other in a dispute over religious doctrine. As the east and west grew further apart, missionaries were sent to “compete for souls.” The Slavic people who adopted Orthodoxy, had their own alphabet developed for them so they would be able to read works from the bible. This was known as the Cyrillic alphabet. The Slavs had been trading with the Byzantines in the 5th century, mainly with the city of Constantinople before the collapse of the empire. Through trade Greek and Byzantine ideas had spread to the Slavic people. Orthodox missionaries also opened up highways for Byzantine influence in Slavic lands, where as an effect, a new Slavic nation had begun to develop. As a result Russian culture grew out of this Greek and Byzantine influence.

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