

Part II – The So-Called Middle Ages
Unit IV – The Byzantine Empire

Unlike most empires, Byzantium has no clear starting point. Its own leaders, as well as its neighbors and enemies, viewed it as simply an extension and continuation of the Roman Empire. In fact, the Byzantines preserved Roman culture, government, and laws. Fearing invasion and wishing to be closer to prosperous Middle Eastern trade routes, Roman Emperor Constantine converted the old port city of Byzantium in modern-day Turkey into a new grand metropolis: Constantinople. A well-fortified city, Constantinople would serve as the capital of the empire from the 400s until its capture by the Turks in 1453. Thus as the western Roman Empire steadily declined during the fifth century, the eastern half would persist for another thousand years. Giving to the world new forms of art and nourishing distinct sects of Christianity, the Byzantines left their mark on the modern world in several ways. How were the Byzantines able to amass such wealth and defend themselves so well at a time when Western Europeans were struggling to survive and living in what some historians derisively call “The Dark Ages”?

Fundamental Themes

The Political and Cultural Endurance of the Byzantine Empire

Byzantine Culture’s Broader Influence to the West and the East

Topics of Study

I. The Formation of the Byzantine Empire – How did the Byzantine Empire begin? Why was Constantinople made the new capital of the Eastern Roman Empire?

Diocletian and Constantine

Constantinople and its Defenses

Western v. Eastern Empires

(Diplomacy, Greek Fire, Theme System)

II. The Byzantine Empire at its Peak – What role did Justinian play in the rise of the Byzantine Empire? What was life in Constantinople like in the 500s?

Justinian and Theodora

The Hagia Sophia

Corpus Iurus Civilis – Justinian Code

Belisarius and Conquest

III. Evolving Byzantine Culture – What was Orthodox Christianity and how was it different from Roman Catholicism? What characterized Byzantine art and culture?

Art and Architecture – Mosaics,

The Ottoman Turks and Mehmed II

Icons, Iconoclasm, and the Great

Impact and Legacy

Schism

Further Reading

Patterns of Interaction, Chapter 11, “Byzantines, Russians, and Turks Interact, 500-1500,” pp. 266-278

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Below is a [tentatively incomplete] list of items to consider and review.

General Topics

Decline of Rome and the Rise of Byzantium
Constantinople
Justinian's Rule
Hagia Sophia

Byzantine Art
Western and Eastern Christianity
Fall of the Byzantine Empire

Events

Diocletian Splits the Empire (285 CE)
Constantine Establishes Twin Capital in
Byzantium (330 CE)
Justinian's Reign (527-565 CE)
Nika Rebellion/Hippodrome Riots (532 CE)
Early Development of the Justinian Code
(529-534 CE)

Justinian Plague (542-700 CE)
Iconoclasm Controversies (First Controversy
in the 700s and Second Controversy in the
early 800s)
The Great Schism (1054 CE)
The Siege of Constantinople (1453 CE)

Key Names, Groups, Ideas, and Concepts

Constantine
Justinian
Theodora
Belisarius
Mehmed II and the Ottoman Turks
Pendentives (e.g. Hagia Sophia)
Theme System

Greek Fire
Constantinople's Mese, Forum, Hippodrome,
Sea Walls, and Other Landmarks
Nika Rebellion/Hippodrome Riots
Construction, Attributes of the Hagia Sophia
The Great Schism