

Byzantine and Moslem Empires

Part 5



Introduction: Empire at a Crossroad

The next few chapters concern two great Middle Eastern empires. One was remarkable for how long it lasted. The other was remarkable for how far it spread. The first was the Byzantine (BIZ-in-teen) Empire, centered in what is now Turkey. The second was the Moslem Empire, which began on the Arabian Peninsula.

These two empires existed at about the same time. At one point, they were rivals for control of the Middle East. Of the two, the Byzantine Empire was the older. And so we begin with the Byzantines.

At a crossroads between Europe and Asia stands a beautiful old city. Today we call it Istanbul (is-tan-BOOL). But for more than a thousand years that city was called Constantinople (con-stan-tuh-NO-pel). It was the capital of the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantine Empire had its roots in both East and

West. It began as the eastern half of the old Roman

Empire. From the beginning, however, it was as much a part of the Middle East as of Europe. The people in the empire called themselves Romans right to the end. But in many ways the Byzantine people were more like the people of the East.

What was so important about the Byzantine Empire?

What makes it worthwhile studying today? There are several answers to this question. Perhaps the most important is the part the Byzantines played in passing ideas from ancient thinkers to us today.

The story of the empire began with the Roman emperor Constantine. He chose an old Greek town called Byzantium (buh-ZAN-she-um) for his capital. He picked the town for its location between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea (see map on page 173). The town had hills where citizens could spot ships or armies from far away. It had water on three sides, and that made it easy to defend.

Byzantium was also a crossroads of trade. The town controlled the waterways from East to West. It controlled land routes used by merchants. People who wanted to take goods from Persia to Rome, for example, had to pass through Byzantium.

Constantine had big plans for Byzantium when he moved his capital there in 330 A.D. He ordered miles of thicker, wider walls built around the city. He also ordered churches, for this was to be the first Christian capital.

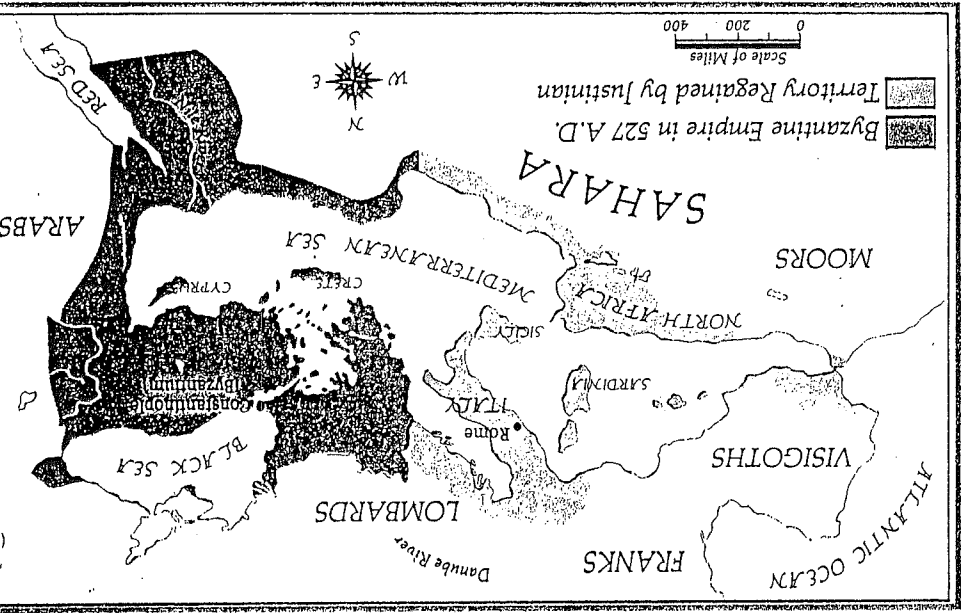
Constantine renamed the town the "New Rome Which Is Constantine's City." That was a lot to say. So people called it Constantinople. From its old name, Byzantium, came the name *Byzantine* for the empire.

The men who followed Constantine built a government that lasted hundreds of years. Most of the power in this government was given to the emperor. The emperor

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The Byzantine Empire, 565 A.D.



This map shows the Byzantine Empire at the time Emperor Justinian took the throne in 527 A.D. It also shows the empire at his death in 565 A.D. Did Justinian double the size of the empire? Or were his gains less than that? Page 170: St. Demetrius, patron saint of warriors, shown in a Byzantine ivory sculpture.

thought he spoke for God. He picked the highest officials of the Christian church. As hundreds of years slid by, the Byzantines came to seem strange to Europeans. Byzantine men wore beards. Men and women alike took a lot of baths. To the educated people of the Byzantine world, the Western Europeans seemed loud and dumb and dirty. They didn't speak Greek, as the Byzantines did. They didn't read. Even their clothes were very plain.

So the two worlds drifted apart. Byzantines came to feel

Marking Time

more at home with people from Persia or India. In time even the Roman and Byzantine churches grew more and more divided. After 1054 the Byzantine church—now called the Eastern Orthodox (OR-thuh-dox) Church—went its own way.

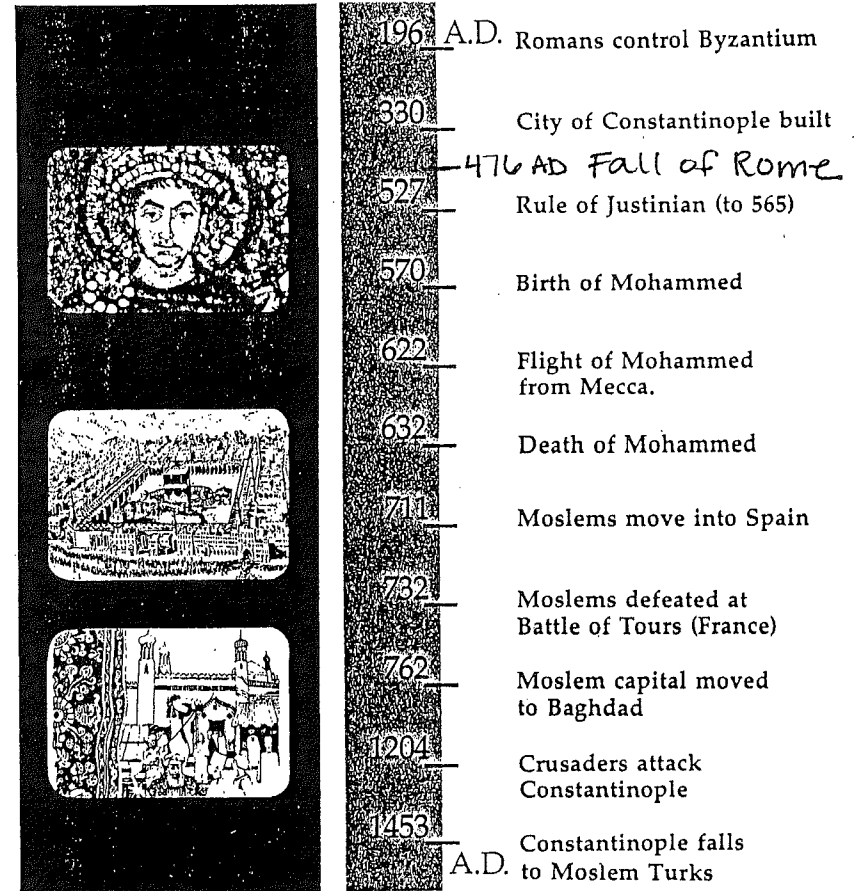
In some ways, the cultural split helped Europe. Why should that be so?

First. The Byzantines saved the learning of Greece and Rome. They saved the poems and plays and ideas of the ancient Western world. Remember that at this time Europe was overrun by people who could not read. European monks were able to save some books, but many more were lost. In the Byzantine world, however, ancient writings were preserved. We might not know about old Greek thinkers today if the Byzantines had not helped to keep their ideas alive.

Second. The Byzantines saved Roman laws. That was important because the Romans had been masters at making laws. Under these laws, citizens had known what was expected of them. They had also known their rights. Roman laws had given the Romans a strong sense of order. The Byzantines kept these laws and added to them.

Third. The Byzantines spread Christianity into Eastern Europe and Russia. They did so through the work of missionaries (priests who taught the faith). These missionaries went out from Constantinople beginning in the ninth century. They left their mark on the countries they visited. That is why many of the people of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union are Christian today.

The Byzantine Empire lasted for more than a thousand years. It began with Constantine in 330. It ended in 1453 when Constantinople fell to an Asian people, the Ottoman (AHT-uh-muhn) Turks. We can only visit the Byzantine Empire at a few high points in its history. And that is what we're about to do.



- In which century did the Romans gain control of Byzantium? How long after that date was the city of Constantinople built?
- For how many years did Justinian rule the Byzantine Empire?
- How old was Mohammed when he fled from Mecca?
- True or false? A century after the death of Mohammed, the Moslems were stopped from expanding across France.
- If the Byzantine Empire began with the building of Constantinople and ended with the fall of that city, how long did the empire last?

