

# 1 Byzantium Becomes the New Rome

## MAIN IDEA

Constantinople ruled an eastern empire that survived for over a thousand years.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Byzantine culture deeply influenced Orthodox Christianity, a major branch of modern Christianity.

## TERMS & NAMES

- Justinian Code
- Hagia Sophia
- patriarch
- icon
- iconoclast
- excommunication
- schism
- Cyrillic alphabet

**SETTING THE STAGE** The western Roman Empire crumbled in the 5th century as it was overrun by invading Germanic tribes. (See Chapter 6.) The threat to the empire, however, was already apparent in the 4th century. Emperor Constantine rebuilt the old port city of Byzantium on the Bosphorus strait for two reasons. In Byzantium, he could respond to the danger of the Germanic tribes. He could also be close to his rich eastern provinces. He renamed the city Constantinople and in the year 330, he made it the capital of the empire.

## A New Rome in a New Setting

Constantine planned Constantinople as the new capital of the empire—the New Rome. As a result of his decision, the empire’s center of power moved eastward. The eastern provinces then began to develop independently of the declining West. An eastern empire would gradually come into being.

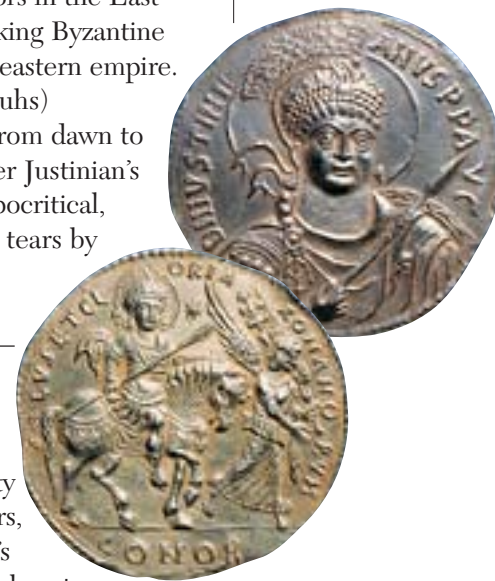
**Justinian: A New Line of Caesars** Because of the difficulties of communication between the eastern and troubled western parts of the empire, they were officially divided in two in 395. Despite this separation, Constantine’s successors in the East continued to see themselves as Roman emperors. In 527, a high-ranking Byzantine nobleman named Justinian succeeded his uncle to the throne of the eastern empire.

In his official writings, court historian Procopius (pruh-KOH-pee-uhs) described Justinian as a serious, even-tempered ruler who worked from dawn to midnight. But in *The Secret History* (a book of gossip published after Justinian’s death), Procopius portrays Justinian as “deceitful, devious, false, hypocritical, two-faced, cruel, skilled in dissembling his thought, never moved to tears by either joy or pain . . . a liar always.”

Whatever his true character, the new emperor quickly decided to make good on his claim to be the head of the whole Roman Empire—of both eastern and western parts. In 533, he sent his best general Belisarius (behl-uh-SAIR-ee-uhs) to recover North Africa from the Vandals. Belisarius got the job done in a few months. Two years later, Belisarius attacked Rome and took it from the Ostrogoths. But the city was repeatedly attacked by other Germanic tribes. In the next 16 years, Rome changed hands six times. After numerous campaigns, Justinian’s armies won nearly all of Italy and parts of Spain. Justinian now ruled almost all the territory that Rome had ever ruled. He could honestly call himself a new Caesar.

**The Absolute Power of the Emperors** Like the last of the old Caesars, the Byzantine emperors ruled with absolute power. They headed not just the state but the Church as well. They appointed and dismissed bishops at will. The politics, however, were brutal, not spiritual. Emperors lived under constant risk of assassination. Of the 88 Byzantine emperors, 29 died violently, and 13 abandoned the throne to live in monasteries.

Both sides of this gold medallion display Emperor Justinian as a military commander. But the coin really celebrates a victory by General Belisarius. The emperor often feared that the general’s popularity would outshine his own.



### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

#### A. Drawing

**Conclusions** How could a historian like Procopius give two such different accounts of the same person? Which do you believe?

#### A. Possible

**Answers** Procopius may have been biased in both cases: to please the emperor with the favorable account; to express his dislike of the emperor with the unfavorable one. There may be some truth in both descriptions.



## Building the New Rome

A separate government and difficult communications with the West gave the Byzantine Empire its own character—different from that of the western empire. The citizens thought of themselves as sharing in the Roman tradition, but few spoke Latin anymore. Most Byzantines spoke Greek. They also belonged to the eastern branch of the Christian Church.

To regulate a complex society, Justinian set up a panel of ten legal experts. Between 528 and 533, they combed through 400 years of Roman law and legal opinions. Some of those laws had become outdated. Some repeated or even contradicted other laws. The panel's task was to create a single, uniform code for Justinian's New Rome.

The result of the panel's work was a body of civil law known as the **Justinian Code**. After its completion, the code consisted of four works.

1. The *Code* contained nearly 5,000 Roman laws, which the experts still considered useful for the Byzantine Empire.
2. The *Digest* quoted and summarized the opinions of Rome's greatest legal thinkers about the laws. This massive work ran to a total of 50 volumes.
3. The *Institutes* was a textbook that told law students how to use the laws.
4. The *Novellae* (New Laws) presented legislation passed after 534.

The Justinian Code decided legal questions that regulated whole areas of Byzantine life. Marriage, slavery, property, inheritance, women's rights, and crimes were just some of those areas. Although Justinian himself died in 565, his code served the Byzantine Empire for 900 years.

**Creating the Imperial Capital** While his scholars were creating the legal code, Justinian launched into the most ambitious public building program ever seen in the Roman world. He rebuilt the crumbling fortifications of Constantinople. The city's coasts were ringed by a 14-mile stone wall. The city was also protected on its only land approach by a deep moat and three walls. The innermost of these was 25 feet thick and had towers 70 feet tall. Justinian saw to it that these massive fortifications were repaired.

Church building was the emperor's greatest passion. His beautiful churches also helped him show the close connection between church and state in his empire. The crowning glory of his reign was **Hagia Sophia** (HAY-ee-uh soh-FEE-uh), which means

"Holy Wisdom" in Greek. A church of the same name had been destroyed in riots that swept Constantinople in 532. When Justinian rebuilt Hagia Sophia, he resolved to make it the most splendid church in the Christian world. Down through the centuries, rich mosaics glittered in the light of a thousand lamps and candles. In fact, more than 400 years after Justinian built his cathedral, the beauty of Hagia Sophia helped convince visiting Russian nobles that their country should adopt Byzantine Christianity.

As part of his building program, Justinian enlarged his palace into a vast complex. He also built baths, aqueducts, law courts, schools, and hospitals. By the time the emperor was finished with his projects, the city teemed with an excitement unmatched anywhere in the eastern and western empires.

### Background

Ethnically, the empire was extremely diverse. Copts, Syrians, Thracians, Armenians, Germans, Huns, and many other groups made up its population.

### Vocabulary

**code:** a general system of laws, from the Latin *codex*, meaning "book."

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### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

**B. Analyzing Motives** Why do you think governments so often build magnificent buildings like Hagia Sophia?

**B. Possible Answer** Possibly to impress or intimidate those they govern; to impress foreign powers.



The emperor often presided over wild chariot races at the Hippodrome, as this fourth-century ivory carving shows. When he dropped a white handkerchief, the races began.

**Constantinople's Hectic Pace** The main street running through Constantinople was the Mese (MEHS-ee) or “Middle Way.” It ran from the imperial complex through a series of public squares and then in two branches to the outer walls. Merchant stalls lined the main street and filled the side streets. A stone roof sheltered the crowds shopping in this giant open-air market. Products from the most distant corners of Asia, Africa, and Europe passed through these stalls. Shoppers could buy tin from England, wine from France, cork from Spain, and ivory and gold from Africa. Fur, honey, and timber came from Russia, spices from India, and silk from China. Everywhere food stands filled the air with the smell of their delicacies, while acrobats and street musicians performed.

Meanwhile, citizens could enjoy free entertainment at the Hippodrome, which offered wild chariot races and circus acts. The Hippodrome (from Greek words meaning “horse” and “racecourse”) held 60,000 spectators. Fans of the different teams formed rowdy gangs named for the colors worn by their heroes.

In 532, two such factions, the Blues and the Greens, sparked citywide riots called the Nika Rebellion (because the mob cried “*Nika!*” or “Victory!”). Both sides were angry at the government. They felt the city prefect (mayor) had been too severe in putting down a previous riot of Hippodrome fans. Even though Justinian dismissed the prefect, the mobs were not satisfied. They packed the Hippodrome and proclaimed a new emperor.

Belisarius, however, broke in with his troops and slaughtered about 30,000 rebels.

Much credit for saving the day must go to Justinian’s wife, Theodora. As her husband’s steely adviser, Theodora had immense power. During the Nika Rebellion, when Justinian considered fleeing the city, Theodora rallied him with a fiery speech:

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

My opinion is that now is a poor time for flight, even though it bring safety. For any man who has seen the light of day will also die, but one who has been an emperor cannot endure to be a fugitive. If now you wish to go, Emperor, nothing prevents you. There is the sea, there are the steps to the boats. But take care that after you are safe, you do not find that you would gladly exchange that safety for death.

THEODORA, quoted by Procopius in *History of the Wars*

## Byzantium Preserves Learning

Byzantine families valued education and sent their children to monastic or public schools or hired private tutors. Basic courses focused on Greek and Latin grammar, philosophy, and rhetoric. The classics of Greek and Roman literature served as textbooks. Students memorized Homer. They learned geometry from Euclid, history from Herodotus, and medicine from Galen. The modern world owes Byzantine scholars a huge debt for preserving many of the great works of Greece and Rome.

#### Vocabulary

**rhetoric:** the study of how to use spoken or written language effectively.

## HISTORY MAKERS



**Empress Theodora**  
500–548

The most powerful woman in Byzantine history rose from deep poverty. Theodora’s father was a bear-keeper. Early in life, Theodora herself was an actress, a despised profession in Byzantium. But she caught Justinian’s eye, and in 525, they married.

As empress, Theodora became a power in her own right. She met with foreign envoys, wrote to foreign leaders, passed laws, and built churches. During a political crisis, Theodora even confiscated the property of the general Belisarius. After she died in 548, Justinian was so depressed that he passed no major laws for the rest of his reign—a sign of Theodora’s political influence.





## The Empire Confronts Its Enemies

Constantinople remained rich and powerful for centuries. After Justinian's death in 565, however, the empire suffered countless setbacks. There were street riots, religious quarrels, palace intrigues, and foreign dangers. Each time the empire moved to the edge of collapse, it found some way to revive—only to face another crisis.

**The Mysterious Plague of Justinian** The first crisis actually began before Justinian's death. It was a disease that resembled what we now know as the bubonic plague. This horrifying illness hit Constantinople in the later years of Justinian's reign. The plague probably arrived from India on ships infested with rats. In 542, at its peak, it is estimated that 10,000 people were dying every day. The illness broke out every 8 to 12 years until around 700, when it finally faded out. By that time, it had destroyed a huge percentage of the Byzantine population. The smaller population left the empire exposed to its enemies.

**Attacks from East and West** Byzantium's enemies pressed in on all sides. Lombards overran Justinian's conquests in the west. Avars, Slavs, and Bulgars made frequent raids on the northern borders. The powerful Sassanid Persians attacked relentlessly in the east. The Persians and Avars struck against Constantinople itself in 626. With the rise of Islam, Arab armies attacked the city in 674 and once again in 717. Russians attempted invasions of the city three times between 860 and 1043. In the 11th century, the Turks took over the Muslim world and fought their way slowly into Anatolia. The Crusades brought armies of knights from Western Europe who pillaged Constantinople in 1204 on their way to fight the Turks.

As their first line of defense, the Byzantines used bribes, diplomacy, and political marriages to prop up their shaky empire. These strategies, however, were not enough. So, in the 7th century, Emperor Heraclius reorganized the empire along military lines. Provinces became *themes*, or military districts. Each theme was run by a general who reported directly to the emperor.

In spite of these measures, the Byzantine Empire slowly shrank under the impact of foreign attacks. By 1350, it was reduced to the tip of Anatolia and a strip of the Balkans. Yet thanks to its walls, its fleet, and its strategic location, the city held out for another 100 years. Finally, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

### Background

Except during Justinian's reign, the Byzantine Empire was relatively small for most of its 1,000-year history. The empire generally included most of Anatolia, Greece, and some of present-day Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia.

## CONNECT to TODAY

### The Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches Today

Today, the Orthodox Church has about 214 million members worldwide. Roman Catholics number about 1 billion. In 1965, the two churches met to discuss their differences and explore the possibilities of reunion.

Statements issued in the late 1980s outlined areas of agreement. Both churches believe that Jesus established seven sacraments, or ceremonies, for Christian worship. Of these sacraments, they consider Holy Communion the most important.

They also agree on the need for priests in the Church. However, as in the 11th century, they still disagree on the role of the pope, on the issue of divorce, and on whether priests may marry.

## The Church Divides

During those many centuries, the Eastern Church in Constantinople continued to flourish. At the same time, however, distance and lack of contact slowly caused the doctrines and rituals of Western and Eastern Christianity to diverge. The Church would eventually split into the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

**A Split Between Rome and Constantinople** Eastern Christianity built its heritage on the works of early church fathers. One was Saint Basil, who, around 357, wrote rules for the life of monks. Another key figure was Saint John Chrysostom (KRIHS-uhs-tuhm). As bishop of Constantinople from 398 to 404, Chrysostom was the **patriarch** (PAY-tree-AHRK), or leading bishop of the East. But even the patriarch bowed to the emperor.

A controversy that tested the emperor's authority over religious matters broke out in the 8th century. In 730, Emperor Leo III banned the use of **icons**, religious images used by eastern Christians to aid their devotions. The emperor thought the use of icons amounted to idol worship. The army supported the emperor's view, and enthusiastic **iconoclasts** (eye-KAHN-uh-KLASTS), or "icon-breakers," broke into churches to destroy images. But the people rioted,

### Background

Today, *iconoclast* means "someone who overthrows respected ideas and traditions."

**Background**

*Catholic* comes from a Greek word meaning “universal.” *Orthodox* comes from two Greek words meaning “right belief.”

## The 11th Century: Differences Between Two Christian Traditions

### Roman Catholic

- Services are conducted in Latin.
- The pope has authority over all other bishops.
- The pope claims authority over all kings and emperors.
- Priests may not marry.
- Divorce is not permitted.

### Eastern Orthodox

- Services are conducted in Greek or local languages.
- The patriarch and other bishops head the church as a group.
- The emperor claims authority over the patriarch and other bishops of the empire.
- Priests may be married.
- Divorce is allowed under certain conditions.

### SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

1. Which church seemed to allow for greater diversity among its members? Why?
2. Who would have more political power: the pope or the patriarch?

### THINK THROUGH HISTORY C. Recognizing

**Effects** How do you think the schism in the Church might affect political relations between the Byzantine Empire and Western Europe?

### C. Possible Answer

The schism might increase distrust and hostility between the empire and the West. It could increase the isolation of both East and West.

and the clergy rebelled. In the West, the pope became involved in this eastern dispute and supported the use of icons. One pope even ordered the **excommunication** of a Byzantine emperor—that is, he declared that the emperor was an outcast from the Church. In 843, more than a hundred years after the controversy began, an order from an empress named Theodora restored icons to Eastern churches.

Differences between the Eastern and Western churches, however, continued to grow. (See the chart above.) In 1054, matters came to a head when the pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other in a dispute over religious doctrine. After this **schism** (SIHZ-uhm), or split, Christianity was permanently divided between the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East.

**Byzantine Missionaries Convert the Slavs** As West and East grew apart, the two traditions of Christianity competed for souls. Missionaries from the Orthodox Church, for example, took their form of Christianity north to the Slavs. Two of the most successful eastern missionaries, Saint Methodius and Saint Cyril (SEER-uhl), worked among the Slavs in the 9th century. Cyril and Methodius invented an alphabet for the Slavic languages. With an alphabet, Slavs would be able to read the Bible in their own tongues. Many Slavic languages, including Russian, are now written in what is called the **Cyrillic** (suh-RIHL-ihk) **alphabet**.

The Orthodox missionaries opened up highways for Byzantine influence in Slavic lands. As these missionaries were carrying out their work among the Slavs, an important new Slavic nation was forming.

A reliquary is a decorated container that holds the remains of holy persons, called saints. This tin reliquary, produced in the 12th century, contains pieces of the bones of Saints Cyril and Methodius.



## Section 1 Assessment

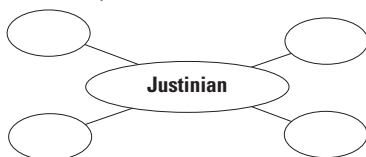
### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- Justinian Code
- Hagia Sophia
- patriarch
- icon
- iconoclast
- excommunication
- schism
- Cyrillic alphabet

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Using a cluster like the one below, show Justinian's accomplishments as emperor of the New Rome.



In your opinion, was Justinian a great leader? Explain.

### 3. ANALYZING MOTIVES

Why do you think Justinian decided in the late 520s that it was the right time to reform Roman law?

#### THINK ABOUT

- the situation of the empire
- the role of laws in societies
- the state of Roman laws before reform

### 4. ANALYZING THEMES

#### Religious and Ethical Systems

Do you think the differences between the Eastern and Western churches could have been reconciled before the Church split? Why? Working in small teams, brainstorm several reasons why the Church separated. For each reason, list two or three ways in which the problems might have been resolved.