

Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire, also known as the Eastern Roman Empire, was the continuation of the Roman Empire which began in 330 AD and lasted until 1453 AD.

During most of its existence, the empire was the most powerful economic, cultural, and military force in Europe before its eventual decline.

The Byzantine Empire left a profound legacy which would shape human history in the centuries to come.

This article will give details about that legacy. The information from this article will be useful in the World History Segment of the IAS Exam.

Origin of the Byzantine Empire

The term “Byzantine” has its origins from the Greek colony of Byzantium. It was located on the European side of the Bosphorus, a strait that links the Black sea to the Mediterranean. In time Byzantium would be an ideal trade and transit route between Europe and Asia

In 330 AD, Roman Emperor Constantine I chose Byzantium as the site of his new capital. Although there are many reason why he did this, the most likely possibilities are as follows:

1. The Roman Empire had become too large to be administered from a single capital - Rome.
2. Barbarian invasions, external aggression from the Sassanid Empire from the East or usurpations by rival claimants to the imperial throne meant that the Emperor was always away from Rome most of the time
3. Thus, a new capital was needed for a flexible administration and as a backup of sorts in case either of them was lost to either war or intrigue

The new capital would be named after Constantine I - Constantinople. The Council of Nicaea formed by Constantine had established Christianity as Rome’s official religion. As such the people of Constantinople and the Eastern Roman Empire identified themselves as Romans and Christians, although they spoke Greek instead of Latin

Facts about Byzantine Empire

- One of the most extraordinary aspects of the Byzantine Empire was its longevity: It was the only organized state west of China to survive without interruption from ancient times until the beginning of the modern age.

- The term “Byzantine Empire” came into common use during the 18th and 19th centuries, but it would’ve been completely alien to the Empire’s ancient inhabitants. They called themselves ‘Romanoi’ or Romans
- Byzantium owed much of its military success to Greek Fire, a mysterious incendiary liquid that was used to set enemy troops and ships ablaze. The formula for it has been lost to history.

Although Constantine ruled over a unified Roman Empire, this unity was shattered after his death in 337 AD. In 364 Emperor Valentinian I divided the empire into two with his brother Valens with him taking over the western half. The last emperor to rule over a united Roman Empire was Theodosius I from 392 to 395 AD.

The fate of the Western and Eastern Roman Empire would diverge in the late 4th Century AD. The Western Roman Empire would be beset from corrupt administration, infighting among the rulers, and pressure of barbarian invasions. Finally it would fall at the hands of Odoacer, a Germanic chief in 476 AD when he deposed the last Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustus.

The Eastern Roman Empire would continue to endure.

The Byzantine Empire Flourishes

The Survival of the Byzantine Empire can be attributed to the following factors

- Due to its geographical location, Eastern Empire was far less vulnerable to attack in comparison to its Western counterpart
- Constantinople was located on a straight and thus had superb defenses against conventional siege weapons (Battering rams, siege towers etc.)
- Defensive factors aside, economically Constantinople was located at the extreme end of the fabled Silk Road. Thus more revenue found its way into the imperial coffers and the Emperor himself had better control over economic resources
- These economic resources would be used to muster sufficient manpower to combat invasions and pay for a standing army.



As a result of these advantages, the Eastern Roman Empire was able to survive for centuries after the fall of Rome.

Though Byzantium was ruled by Roman law and Roman political institutions, and its official language was Latin, Greek was also widely spoken, and students received education in Greek history, literature and culture.

Rise of the Byzantine Empire

It was under the rule of Emperor Justinian I from 527 to 565 that the Byzantine Empire reached its greatest extent. Under his general Belisarius, the Byzantine army conquered much of the former territories of the Roman Empire including North Africa.

During Justinian's rule many monuments were built including the famous Hagia Sophia. Justinian also reformed and codified Roman law establishing a system of legal code that would form the nucleus of civil law in many European countries

At the time of Justinian's death, the Byzantine Empire reigned supreme as the largest and most powerful state in Europe. Debts incurred through war had left the empire in dire financial straits,

however, and his successors were forced to heavily tax Byzantine citizens in order to keep the empire afloat.

But the Byzantine empire would find itself stretched too thin trying to defend invasions from Burglars, Sassanids and later Arab armies. The Arabs would conquer the Levant and even managed to assail Constantinople twice (Once in 674–678 the other from 717–718) but without success.

By the end of the 7th century, Byzantium would lose Syria, the Holy Land, Egypt and North Africa (among other territories) to Arab forces.

Decline of the Byzantine Empire

The Crusades began in the late 11th century. There were a series of wars waged by the Christians of Europe against the Muslims of the Near East from 1095 to 1291.

In the first Crusade, Emperor Alexius I turned to the West for help against the Seljuk Turks barreling their way towards Constantinople. Pope Urban II obliged by calling in armies from France, Germany and Italy to fight in a holy war.

But there would be animosity between the Byzantines and their Western Allies regarding the rights of territory. The Schism between the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches that had occurred centuries before did not help.

The animosity finally culminated when during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, the Crusaders sacked and looted **Constantinople**. The Latin regime which established control could not hold onto their gains as a hostile population and lack of money made their position untenable.

Many refugees from Constantinople fled to Nicaea, site of a Byzantine government-in-exile that would retake the capital and overthrow Latin rule in 1261.

But the empire had begun its terminal decline at this point.

The economy of the once-mighty Byzantine state was crippled, and never regained its former stature.

Eventually in 1273 Emperor John V was forced to become a vassal of a rising Turkish Ottoman Sultanate

As a vassal state, Byzantium paid tribute to the sultan and provided him with military support. Under John's successors, the empire gained sporadic relief from Ottoman oppression, but the rise of Murad II as sultan in 1421 marked the end of the final respite.

His successor Mehmed II laid siege to and conquered Constantinople by May 29 1453. Mehmed triumphantly entered the Hagia Sophia, which would soon be converted to the city's leading mosque.

The fall of Constantinople marked the end of the Byzantine Empire. Emperor Constantine XI died in battle that day, and the Byzantine Empire collapsed, ushering in the long reign of the Ottoman Empire.

Legacy of the Byzantine Empire

In the centuries leading up to the final Ottoman conquest in 1453, the culture of the Byzantine Empire—including literature, art, architecture, law and theology—flourished even as the empire itself faltered.

Byzantine culture would exert a great influence on the Western intellectual tradition, as scholars of the Italian Renaissance sought help from Byzantine scholars in translating Greek pagan and Christian writings. (This process would continue after 1453, when many of these scholars fled from Constantinople to Italy.)

Long after its end, Byzantine culture and civilization continued to exercise an influence on countries that practiced its Eastern Orthodox religion, including Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, among others.