



CHAPTER 13

The Byzantine Empire

*T*hroughout the centuries in which the faith of Islam spread in the Middle East, the Christian Byzantine Empire persevered as rival, enemy, and sometime trading partner. For over 1100 years the Byzantines ruled in parts of the eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Black Sea region. As discussed in earlier chapters, from the seventh century on the Byzantines profoundly influenced the Middle East: during the early days of the Islamic ummah, the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, and the early and late medieval periods. In architecture, institutions, culture, imperial customs, economic structures, and many other aspects of life the Byzantine historical experience affected not only the empire's earlier contemporaries but also its chief successor—the Muslim Ottoman Empire, which at last destroyed the Byzantine state in the fifteenth century.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE

In a sense the Byzantine Empire was the continuation and heir of the Roman Empire after the last western emperor in 476, but with three significant differences from the old Roman Republic and Empire: the Byzantine state was Christian, not pagan; its dominant language was Greek, not Latin; and its center was in the eastern Mediterranean, not in Italy. Byzantine history begins with the era of the emperor Constantine and his dedication of the new city of Constantinople on the site of ancient Byzantium in 330.

Except for a period in the thirteenth century when western European knights of the Fourth Crusade occupied it, Constantinople was the hub of the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire until its fall to the Ottomans in 1453 (after which the city was known as either Istanbul or Constantinople). In choosing a site for a new imperial capital, Constantine placed his chief residence close to the populous part of the empire and in a situation for the defense of the Balkan (southeastern European) provinces.

The eleven centuries of Byzantine rule witnessed, especially in Constantinople, the preservation and propagation of the Christian faith and its theology; the knowledge of the Roman and Hellenistic ages; the art and architecture of the ancient world; and many

techniques of government discovered through centuries of Roman rule. In Constantinople, the emperor was the absolute monarch. Except in a very few provinces, civil and military powers were separated, and a regular civil service system for the various bureaus of government was expanded on the basis of merit and seniority. Starting with Constantine, the emperors and the Christian churches of the east closely cooperated. They participated in Christian affairs by calling general councils of the church, and they used their imperial power to try to achieve uniformity in Christian doctrine.

From its first days, therefore, the Byzantine state embodied Roman imperial tradition, Christian orthodoxy, and Hellenistic culture—forces that gave direction to government, religion, and society in Constantinople for a thousand years.

POLITICAL HISTORY

Following Constantine, more than seventy emperors or empresses belonging to several dynasties held the imperial throne of Constantinople before its fall in 1204 to Fourth Crusaders. A relatively large number of these rulers were capable leaders; many were outstanding. Theodosius I (r. 379–395) made Christianity the official and sole religion of the empire. Theodosius II (r. 408–450) published the code of Roman law bearing his name and constructed the land walls of Constantinople, which stretched from the Sea of Marmara five miles to the Golden Horn. Without a doubt this formidable barrier on countless occasions saved the imperial city, and therefore the empire, from northern barbarians and the Muslims.

Justinian I (r. 527–565) was particularly noteworthy. Many of his structures still stand in Istanbul (the former Constantinople), such as the incomparable Church of Hagia Sophia. Equally celebrated were the Justinian codes of laws. These codes remained the foundation of law through the years in the Byzantine Empire; they appeared in Italy in the twelfth century and served as the basis for the reintroduction of Roman law in western Europe. Probably the main reason for publication of the laws was Justinian's need for rigorous control of the empire and efficient collection of taxes to provide funds for his military campaigns in North Africa, Italy, and Spain.

The next gifted emperor, Heraclius (r. 610–641), an Armenian soldier, was the reviver of the empire. It was under him that Greek became the official language of the empire. Upon his accession he found disturbed conditions, with Slavs and Sasanians threatening the empire's existence. By reuniting church and state, by revitalizing the army and navy, and by reinstituting strict economy, Heraclius defeated the Sasanians in a series of brilliant campaigns and freed Syria and Egypt from their control. However, the financial strain of these wars and the cost in manpower left him vulnerable and the recovered provinces were lost to Islam in Heraclius's last days.

During the remainder of the seventh century the frontiers contracted under the rule of the Heraclian dynasty; North Africa was lost, to be followed by the Byzantine portions of Italy in the next century. Local rulers maintained control of many parts of the Balkans from the seventh to the eleventh centuries. The economy of the state materially weakened as population decreased. Muslim armies ravaged Anatolia, camped near Constantinople, and took to the sea in the eastern Mediterranean. But Leo III (r. 717–740) preserved the empire despite these problems. He favored legal and religious reforms and advanced the

military system of themes, by which free soldiers were granted land to support and arm themselves for the battles against the Muslim Arabs.

A contemporary of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid, the empress Irene (r. 797–802) was the Greek wife of Leo's grandson and the power behind the throne for twenty years. Irene blinded her son and ruled alone as emperor until overthrown by a revolution. She paid tribute to the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid, an indication of the decline of Byzantine power. Domestically, she gave her support to factions in the capital that favored icons, disclosing the deep-seated religious division that persisted in the empire. Many with Monophysite Christian tendencies, especially those from eastern reaches of the empire, were iconoclastic; that is, they objected to icons, images, and pictures in church services. Leo III, over the protests of many clergy, forbade the use of icons, an act pleasing to the soldiery of his eastern themes. Irene made a political alliance with orthodox churchmen, and for their favor in her struggle for power she pursued orthodox doctrines of anti-iconoclasm. The debate over iconoclasm racked the empire not only in Irene's reign but for a period of about 125 years, from 717 to 843.

The empire suffered a loss of power until the ascent of Basil the Macedonian (r. 867–886). Maintaining its supremacy until 1056, his Macedonian dynasty led the empire during one of the more brilliant periods of its long life. Basil, of peasant origin, rose from the imperial stables, where his feats of prowess attracted the attention of the emperor. Soon co-ruler, Basil I took the next step and had his patron murdered. Nevertheless, he and his successors, particularly Basil II (r. 976–1025), were capable emperors, publishing codes of laws, restoring harmony in the church, sponsoring a classical cultural revival, and pursuing a vigorous expansion of the state against Arab Muslims, Armenians, and Bulgarians. Byzantines controlled northern Syria for over a century after 969, and they added Crete, Cyprus, eastern Anatolia, and much of the Balkans to the empire as well. The strength of the Byzantine army was due to the development of a new corps of guards, recruitment of a mobile field army, and strengthening the theme system by uniting military and civilian provincial administration. Byzantine culture, religion, and commerce also spread to Russia, Bulgaria, and Serbia.

From the death of Basil II until the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusaders in 1204, a series of calamities befell the Byzantine state, reducing its effective power to an alarming degree. Beginning in the tenth century, transformation of the rural society and economy proceeded relentlessly. The free peasant and the free landholding soldier, especially in Anatolia, were disappearing as a result of the expansion of great estates held by the landed military aristocracy and the church. Even though there was a clear increase in economic activity between 1000 and 1200, and the population grew, especially in the European provinces, heavy taxes, famine, and insecurity caused the peasants to lose their lands to powerful lords. The stronger the magnates became, the more certain they were to obtain privileges, reduced taxes, and many other concessions from the central authorities. In turn, these events weakened the Byzantine fiscal position, lowered the available supply of loyal soldiers, harmed the theme military system, and created a powerful class in the provinces that was able to threaten an unwary or uncooperative emperor. By the middle of the tenth century, emperors began to issue decrees to halt this process, but to no avail.

When the strong hand of Basil II was removed in 1025, intense rivalry between the landed military aristocrats of the provinces and the powerful bureaucrats of the capital flared openly in the competition for the throne. From 1025 until 1057, the civilian government

thwarted some thirty rebellions and exiled, executed, or blinded a long list of generals who had mounted these insurrections. But the bureaucracy, looking for compliant emperors, found for the most part incompetents.

Since the main strength of the great Anatolian families lay in their control of the armies stationed in their midst, the bureaucrats set out to dismantle these local troops by withholding financial support from them, dismissing competent generals, and commuting military duty into cash payments. The army became increasingly staffed by foreign mercenaries, who lacked loyalty to the Byzantine state. This was done at a time when Seljuk Turks were pressing on the frontiers in the east, the Normans of southern Italy were expanding, and others were invading the Balkans. In addition to the ease with which they changed sides, the mercenaries frequently ravaged the Anatolian countryside and reduced the flow of taxes to the imperial treasury. The economy of the empire sagged and the power of the state ebbed as the rival parties for political power, in spite of all consequences and at all costs, vied for supremacy.

With the accession of Alexius I Comnenus to the throne in 1081, the generals began a reign that lasted until the fall of Constantinople in 1204. During most of that time the Comneni dynasty ruled the empire, spanning the years of the early Crusades. Despite the successes of Alexius, under his heirs civil wars continued unabated, with generals and leading families feuding among themselves and seeking to establish semi-independent principalities. Not least among these rivals were former mercenary leaders, many of them Normans and Turks. Alexius's daughter, Anna Comnena, left a most interesting account of the arrival of the First Crusade at Constantinople; the contrast in culture and civilization of the two Christian societies of her day was sharply drawn. In 1054, the western Christian church, led by the bishop of Rome, had officially declared the eastern church, headed by the patriarch of Constantinople, to be schismatic. The division between the two parts of Europe—the Catholic west and the Orthodox east—was even more emphatic in light of the flourishing of Byzantine culture, especially in the areas of rhetoric, history writing, theology, and the making of icons and other forms of art.

During most of the twelfth century the Comneni contained the dangers from the west, using a strong fleet against the Normans, tactful diplomacy against the papacy and Crusaders, and a balance-of-power strategy with Venice. In the east, the Byzantines allied with Orthodox Georgia and traded peacefully with the Seljuks of Anatolia, but they faced strong opposition from Armenians and the Crusader states. In the 1180s internal quarrels and foreign reverses began a downward spiral. A large influx of western Catholics into Constantinople coincided with many influential government positions being given to them, much to the displeasure of the local bureaucracy. A strong popular antiwest reaction ensued. In 1204 Constantinople fell to Venetians and Fourth Crusaders, an act that ended the true Byzantine Empire. What later passed for that empire proved to be only a shell of its former power, grandeur, and significance.

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Before discussing this later phase of the empire, it may be well to study a few institutions of society as they were at the height of Byzantine glory, for their forms persevered

into the weak last days and even beyond, into the Ottoman period. The strongest and most vital arm of the emperor was the Christian church. After the demise of paganism in the fourth century, Constantinople, the Balkans, and Anatolia were devoted in their support and loyalty to the church. The church's organization, with the patriarch at its apex, gave powerful support or presented determined opposition to the emperor and government. Consequently, the emperor tried to control the selection of the patriarch, while the patriarch had a strong influence with the emperor; there was a close and intricate relationship between the two posts.

Church monasteries and convents were socially, economically, and religiously important, and the monks were often popular heroes. Frequently, the government found it necessary to follow doctrines espoused by the populace, even though other dogmas would have been preferable for reasons of imperial policy. Whenever an emperor compromised with what was deemed heresy, to mollify a distant province or the army in some Asian theme, or entered into an understanding with the Roman papacy regarding the universal Christian church, orthodox voices in Constantinople were heard in opposition. And the Orthodox church strongly opposed Islam, condemning it on theological as well as political grounds.

In a way, the church resembled an administrative department of the government, and the patriarch acted as a minister of state in charge of religion. A dynamic emperor chose, appointed, and dismissed patriarchs; an energetic patriarch bent weak emperors to his will—yet at most times, the emperor was supreme and the church was subordinate to the state.

GENDER, AGRICULTURE, AND THE ECONOMY

Historical records for the Byzantine Empire are relatively scanty, particularly those dealing with aspects of social and economic history beyond the realms of the Orthodox Church. Men produced most of the information passed down to subsequent generations and the society was patriarchal in its values and institutions. Male writers often portrayed women negatively.

Most women had far more limited opportunities than did men, as in education and law. Law courts favored men in issues relating to divorce and as witnesses. Nevertheless, Byzantine women did have equal rights to inherit property. Many wealthy women became patrons of the arts, the church, and charity. Parents arranged marriages for their children; society regarded childbearing and child rearing as the chief purpose of women's lives. Weaving clothes and preparing food were major occupations for most women in their households.

Middle- and upper-class urban women were generally secluded, often veiled, and had little interaction with men outside their immediate families. Poorer urban women and the vast majority of the female population who lived in the villages were not as secluded and they interacted much more often with men. Many women were sellers of goods and some owned businesses. Women shared with men a strong interest in worship, pilgrimages, and religious controversies such as iconoclasm. Poor women whose spouses died would often seek refuge and support in a convent.

The sometimes prominent role of women in the imperial family should not obscure the fact that most women had no major part in public life. However, Byzantine empresses occasionally acted as regents, they could transmit dynastic legitimacy through their marriages, and they often influenced policy, though only three women ruled directly on their own.

The provision of food for urban men and women became more difficult after the loss of Egypt to the Muslims. Now Constantinople, the largest city of the empire by far, had to draw its wheat, olives, grapes, and domesticated animals from Anatolia and nearby Thrace.

The life of the peasants living in villages was difficult, and few envied them. Given the problems of disease, heavy taxation, moneylenders, and many other ills, peasants appealed to the saints for help. The growth of great estates at the expense of the small freeholding peasants in the twelfth century especially increased their oppression. Yet they seldom lacked the bare essentials of life, and private churches, monasteries, and rich families provided charity to the poor.

Land was fundamental to the economy. Livestock such as oxen increased productivity, while monasteries had enough economic stability to provide many with a living. Urban dwellers often bought and held land as an investment.

Although agriculture was the mainstay of the empire, artisanal production and commerce gave it wealth and luxury. In the cities of the empire compact populations were engaged to a considerable degree in making articles of everyday use. Many, too, produced luxury goods of great value, which were used in the rituals and services of thousands of churches and monasteries and were vital to the pageantry of the imperial court. Sumptuous living was much enjoyed, and the wealth of silk fabrics, gold brocades, jewelry, enameled wares, fine glassware, and all the precious and refined luxury of the age dazzled visitors. The crafts and skills of Hellenistic artisans prevailed for a thousand years in the Byzantine world.

The most active commercial city of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, was filled with warehouses, depots, banks, money changers, and other aids to foreign and domestic commerce. Trade from the Black Sea area and most of Russia centered upon Constantinople. Goods from the Far East and western Asia passed down the Bosphorus to quays on the Golden Horn. Domestic imperial production also gravitated to the capital for exchange and transshipment. Ships plied regularly between Constantinople and Trebizond, Salonica, Venice, and Genoa. A standard tax of 10 percent, levied on all imports and exports, brought to the imperial government a large part of its revenue. Italian cities, however, found it possible to obtain tariff concessions from the emperors, which allowed them to dominate long-distance trade.

Commerce and artisanal production were strictly regulated by the government. Controls were exercised over prices, quality, and quantity of goods produced or imported, profits, locations of business, labor conditions, and movement of workers. Implementation of these controls was effected by individual guilds, which were highly organized and fully developed before C.E. 900. Governments granted most guilds special privileges and monopolies. To some extent guilds were restrictive and conservative in character. Yet they prevented speculation and collusion, protected rights of individuals in local and distant markets, and performed many social and legal functions for members. The state

appointed the heads of the guilds, and by regulating their activities, it controlled much of the urban economy.

THE CRUSADES

In 1071, when Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes was defeated by the Seljuk sultan Alparslan at the battle of Manzikert near Lake Van, the rout was so complete that soon eastern and central Anatolia were overrun with Turkish bands. Food supplies and raw materials, revenues, commerce, trade routes, and manpower supplies were lost; this further contraction of the empire ultimately spelled its doom.

When Romanus IV Diogenes marched out to meet Alparslan, not only was his military equipment woefully inferior but half of his soldiers were merely untrained city youths and the other half were unreliable mercenaries. On his way to battle he had to subdue his own unruly Germans; his predecessors also had alienated many Armenians. In the heat of the battle the leader of the contingent of bureaucrats in the emperor's army spread the word that Romanus was being defeated and withdrew his men. Turkish forces, witnessing the anarchy, attacked the Byzantine army in flight and captured the emperor. It had been more than 250 years since an emperor had been taken prisoner in battle!

The humiliation of the battle of Manzikert accelerated the fragmentation of society. When the Turks set Romanus IV free, civil war over the throne erupted, further destroying military power in Anatolia and creating a power vacuum. Petty independent states sprang up everywhere: Normans in Bithynia; Seljuk Turks at Nicaea; Armenians in the southeast; and Turkish (Turkoman) tribes everywhere. As a result, Byzantine cultural borrowing and military dependence increased. Before the able general Alexius I Comnenus seized the imperial throne in 1081, several contenders had even relied on Turkish armies in their battles against each other. These actions and the encouragement of Alparslan to Turkoman tribes to invade Anatolia brought Turkish sieges of many walled towns and the general ravaging of the countryside in every corner of Anatolia.

At last Alexius I Comnenus sent out a desperate call to western Christendom for aid. The Crusades were the response, but in the long run they did more harm than good for the Byzantine Empire. The west expended little sentiment over the Byzantine Empire, as the Fourth Crusade demonstrated. The fall of Constantinople to Venetian merchants and soldiers in 1204 abruptly terminated the Byzantine Empire, and its society and civilization collapsed. The Orthodox church was Latinized; monasteries disappeared; the wealth of the churches was carried off; learning and literature vanished; and works of art were destroyed.

The flight of the Byzantine court and ruling classes from Constantinople in 1204 had the immediate effect of producing several independent Greek principalities in the Byzantine provinces. Meanwhile, the new Latin empire of Constantinople hardly had a chance. Fraught with internal feuding and largely deserted by the west, the Crusaders were hemmed in by the expanding second Bulgarian kingdom (founded around 1186) and by Byzantine states. Finally, in 1261, Michael Palaeologus, a general, overthrew the Latins and reestablished the Byzantine state in Constantinople under Palaeologi rule. Greece and the Aegean, however, continued as several Latin-ruled states.

THE END OF BYZANTINE RULE

From 1261 to 1453 Byzantine rule held in Constantinople, but it cannot justly be regarded as a restoration of the Byzantine Empire. It was never more than a small Greek kingdom, and for the final half century nothing more than the capital city itself. The old empire was broken beyond repair. Furthermore, the Mongol invasions weakened the Seljuks of Anatolia, who controlled much of Anatolia. The resulting power vacuum opened the way to the new Ottoman state, which was built upon the Seljuk and Byzantine legacies.

The Palaeologi tried to maintain a style of imperial government unjustified by the extent of their actual domain. Only a small part of northwestern Anatolia remained in their hands, and most of the Balkans were held by Bulgarian and Serbian rulers. The Byzantines now had no imperial navy. Land revenue was extremely low, as fiscal, judicial, and administrative affairs increasingly fell into the hands of the church and local landlords. Revocable government grants of revenue became hereditary, and the services owed by the grant holders were frequently ignored. The peasants in the fourteenth century were becoming poorer as the central government lost power and authority. Indeed, with so much trade passing to western Europe through Mamluk Egypt the imperial crown jewels had to be pawned in Venice. Most of the Byzantine population realized the empire they considered to be protected by God was in decline; a mood of grim persistence dominated the public.

One mediocre ruler succeeded another; palace poverty and intrigue spawned civil wars and revolutions. Toward the middle of the fourteenth century the poor rose in Constantinople and massacred the aristocracy, while in 1347 bubonic plague devastated Byzantine cities. Interminable strife also marked the history of the church. The Palaeologi, in their desperation for aid, repeatedly made bids to subordinate the Orthodox church to the pope of Rome. Monks, churchmen, and the people objected, and religious unity with the west was continually being postponed or abandoned.

Foreigners gained more power in the empire. From their docks and counting houses of Galata, a suburb across the Golden Horn from Constantinople, the Venetians and Genoese yearly grew more powerful and more insolent in their dealings with the Palaeologi. The most spectacular group of foreigners that came to the Byzantine state was the mercenary Catalan Grand Company of soldiers, who were hired in 1302 to combat the mounting aggression of the Turks. The emperor, however, was soon more terrified of the Catalans than he was of the Turks. No longer could the state afford a regular standing army; the mercenaries, smallholders, and heavy cavalry grant holders could be paid and supported only when a crisis arose or a threat appeared.

In the century and a half preceding the fall of Constantinople, international politics in the Byzantine area consisted almost entirely of constantly shifting alliances and realignments among the Byzantine successor states, of which the Greek state was only one. However, when Venetians and Serbs banded together to seize Constantinople, Orhan, the Ottoman ruler, was given the hand of Theodora, the daughter of the emperor John VI Cantacuzenus, as partial inducement to bring his forces across the Dardanelles into Europe to defend Thrace from that combination. A rival emperor in alliance with the Genoese drove the Ottomans back to Asia and sent his predecessor to a monastery,

where he spent the rest of his days writing his brilliant memoirs. Deposed by his own son and the Genoese, the new emperor called for Ottoman support, which returned him victoriously to Constantinople in 1379.

From that time on Ottoman sultans were deeply involved in Byzantine affairs. Emperors frequently recognized sultans as their overlords and sent their sons as hostages to the Ottoman court. Sultans plotted palace revolutions in Constantinople, and emperors sponsored rivals to the sultan's throne and intrigued with other Turkish principalities against the Ottomans. Manuel II (r. 1391–1425) and Mehmed I personally discussed affairs from their respective galleys on the European shores of the Bosphorus and then crossed to the Asiatic side for a picnic. When an emperor died childless in 1448, Murad II approved the selection of Constantine XI, whose niece married Mehmed II. The various groups in the area had much in common, despite religious differences; their leaders and societies were coming to resemble each other in many ways. Still, the Ottoman Muslim dynasty was a rival to the Byzantines.

At first the Ottomans were invited and hired by Byzantine emperors to fight in battles against Serbs, Bulgars, and Italians or for one faction of Palaeologi against another. Later they settled in Europe, and before the close of the fourteenth century they had become masters of Thrace, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and parts of Serbia. Constantinople was isolated but obtained a fifty-year reprieve from Timur's crushing defeat of the Ottomans at the battle of Ankara in 1402. Constantinople was all that remained of the Byzantine Empire. That it did not fall to the Ottomans after their state was re-created under Mehmed I can be credited almost wholly to its superb defensive position. Protected by water on three sides and the marvelous Theodosian wall between the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmara on the fourth side, the inhabitants of Constantinople felt secure.

By building castles on the European shore of the Bosphorus in 1452, the Ottoman ruler Mehmed II was able to blockade Constantinople by sea. Control of the Balkans gave him complete freedom to mass an army equipped with heavy artillery before the land walls in the spring of 1453. When the walls were breached and his navy transported from the Bosphorus over the hills of Pera to the Golden Horn, the fate of Constantinople was sealed. Constantine XI died on the walls, Muslim prayers were recited in Hagia Sophia, and bells tolled in Europe. The once great and vigorous Byzantine Empire finally succumbed after a long and painful illness. The young Ottoman Empire ushered in a new day for the great imperial site on the Bosphorus.

Through the ages and up to the present, writers have maligned the Byzantine Empire, its civilization, and particularly its rulers. Intrigue, court politics and palace revolutions, the sharp business acumen of the merchants, and the mercenary character of some aspects of its life all led historians to use the word *byzantine* in a derogatory manner. Nevertheless, a close study of Byzantine records reveals a complex society that possessed an efficient government and excellent public services, managed and directed by an educated and sophisticated bureaucracy, and protected by an army of high tactical ability. At a time when western Europe was semibarbaric, some inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire were enjoying literature, philosophy, urban social culture, and a much higher standard of living. Certainly the Byzantine Empire had a great impact on the peoples and governments of the Middle East and especially on the Ottoman Empire.

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