

The Eastern Empire Survives



In A.D. 330, on May 11, the history of the Roman Empire changed forever. On that date, the Emperor Constantine dedicated a new capital in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. He ordered the city christened as New Rome. It was an urban trading center first established by the Greeks centuries earlier and called Byzantium.

The Roman Empire had been divided in two during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (285-305). While Diocletian ruled in the eastern half of the Empire at a city named Nicomedia, Constantine made New Rome his capital because he wanted a city as splendid as Rome itself.

But Constantine had another reason for establishing the capital at New Rome, which was to be commonly called Constantinople, after the Emperor. Christianity had made great strides within the Empire over 300 years time. Constantine supported Christianity (although he was not baptized until just before his death in 337). Rome had long been considered by the Christians as a pagan city. Constantine believed that the Empire needed a new city, a Christian capital.

A century and a half later, when the western half of the Roman Empire was being overrun by the Germanic tribes, the eastern half was somewhat untouched by such invasions. In addition, many of the problems the western Empire was facing, such as political assassinations, corrupt emperors, inflation and little trade, were not happening in the East.

One reason was its geographic location. Constantinople (today the modern city of Istanbul, Turkey) was located on the southern end of the Bosphorus, a neck of land that connects the north-eastern Mediterranean and the route to the Black Sea. Positioned at the crossroads between Europe

and Asia, Constantinople was destined to be a prosperous city, one which served as the great trading city of its day.

The trade of Constantinople was to be based on gold coins, one in particular. Known as the *bezant*, it contained 65 grains of pure gold. For over 700 years, the bezant kept its value and was used in trade by many nations and peoples from the British Isles to the Far East, even China.

As the Roman Empire in the West collapsed in the late 400s, in the East, the Empire flourished. Although the people of the Eastern Empire continued to refer to themselves as Roman, historians refer to this remaining half of the old Empire by a different name: the Byzantine Empire.

Life in Byzantium (Constantinople) was, in many ways, similar to life in ancient Rome. Ironically, both cities were built across seven hills. Many of the buildings were similar to other Roman architecture. There was an immense chariot racing track just like the Hippodrome in Rome and an arena similar to the Coliseum. The city featured many public baths, just as Rome did. Free bread was distributed to the masses and games and races were common entertainment.

Eventually, after the western half of the Roman Empire fell under German domination and Roman Imperial rule collapsed, the Byzantine Empire continued for another 1000 years. Ruled by many emperors, including eleven named Constantine, Byzantium did not fall to an enemy until May 29, in the year 1453, when the city was overrun following a siege laid down by Moslem Turks.

Review and Write

1. Why did Constantine establish a new Roman capital at Byzantium?
2. In what ways were the cities of Rome and Byzantium similar?
3. What was the *bezant*, and why was it important to the economy of Byzantium?