

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire was the direct continuation of the eastern half of the old Roman Empire. Long after Rome fell under the domination of the Germanic invaders of the fourth and fifth centuries, Byzantium continued on with an emperor on the throne in Constantinople. These emperors ruled as if the Roman Empire was still in existence.

This empire, despite being only half of the old Roman Empire was an extensive kingdom nevertheless. Its territories spread along the southern shores of the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. By the mid-500s, expansive-minded Byzantine emperors had moved into territory of the former western half of the Roman Empire including the Italian peninsula and northern Africa.

Over the 1000 years of the Byzantine Empire, two periods of greatness stand out. The first took place in the 6th century (the 500s) and was followed by two centuries of relative decline of imperial power. The second great period was from the 8th to the 11th century (the 700s to 1000s). Four hundred years of decline followed, ultimately leading to the Empire's fall to the Turks in 1453.

During Byzantium's first great period, one emperor was outstanding. His name was Justinian and he ruled from 527–565. His reign saw great Byzantine expansion across North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and even southern Spain. He fought other wars less successfully, including exhausting campaigns against the Persians.

This great Byzantine emperor rose to power from a simple background. He was born a peasant, yet was fired by ambition and great energy. During his reign, he pursued high goals and ideals. He wanted to restore the empire to its former Roman glory.

In one sense, Justinian was the last of the great Roman emperors. His reign was one of the last that still used Latin as the official royal language. After his death, the Latin tradition began to die out and

Greek became the official language of the eastern empire. This caused the Byzantines to think of themselves ultimately as different from the Romans and loosened the historical ties between Rome and Constantinople.

Great strides were taken by Justinian during his reign. He oversaw the construction of a great church

in the city that would prove to be the shining example of Byzantine architecture. Known as the Church of the Hagia Sophia (HI yuh SO FI yuh), it was a monumental work. (Hagia Sophia translates from the Greek as *Holy Wisdom*.)

The building measures 250 feet by 235 feet and features a great dome measuring 107 feet across and peaking at a height of 185 feet. The building took five years to complete with 10,000 men working on it. Inside, the great church was adorned with marble, elaborate columns, intricate mosaics, and gold.

Another contribution of Justinian was the reforming and codifying of Roman law. He ordered the creation of a commission to study Roman law and to bring it together in a unified form. The result was the Code, which included all Roman law up to A.D. 534. Also, the commission arranged the Digest, which included all the cases that served as interpretations of the law. This new work commissioned by Justinian gave new prestige to old Roman law.



Review and Write

1. What are some of the successes of the reign of Emperor Justinian?
2. Why do you think a "Roman" emperor such as Justinian would order the construction of a great church such as the Hagia Sophia?