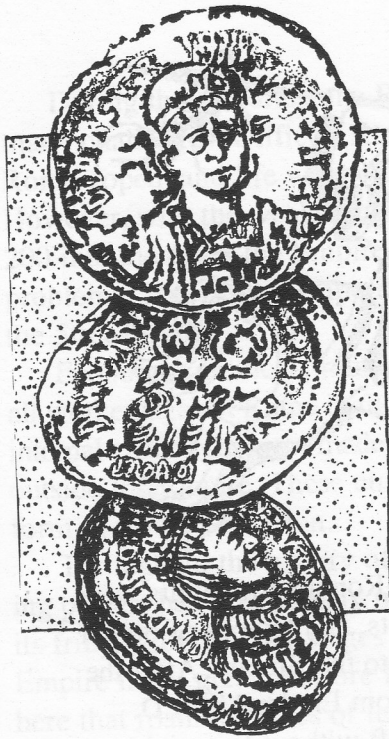


The Eastern Empire Survives



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, 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?

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

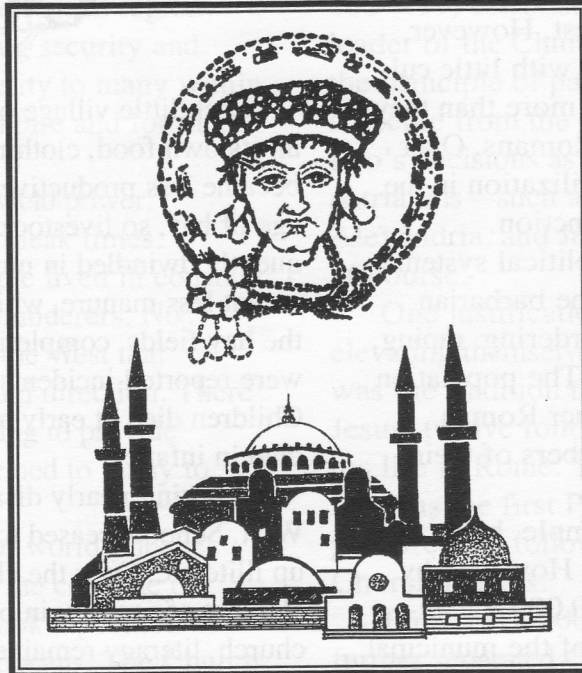
Greek became the official language of the eastern empire. This caused the Byzantines to think of themselves ultimately as different from the Romans and loosened the historical ties between Rome and Constantinople.

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?