

Eastern Europe

5

In ancient times, Greece had built one of the world's greatest civilizations, a center of culture and science that reached its peak in the period 490–404 B.C. Even as Greece declined, its influence spread from Italy to Egypt to India, so that by the time the Roman Empire conquered Greece in 146 B.C., Rome had been thoroughly influenced by Greek civilization. Beginning in A.D. 330, the Roman Empire began to split into Greek, or Eastern, and Roman, or Western, halves. Divisions between the two lands widened after the West fell and the East became the Byzantine Empire. Ethnic differences further widened the gap: while Germans overran the western half of the continent, much of Eastern Europe came under the dominance of a people called the Slavs.

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine (BIZ-un-teen) Empire had its beginnings with Constantine, who in 330 founded a second Roman capital at a city overlooking the strait that separates Europe from Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The city became Con-



Words to Know: Eastern Europe

Civil service: The administrators and officials who run a government.

City-state: A city that is also a self-contained political unit, like a country.

Clergy: The priesthood, or all ministers.

Clerical: Relating to priests.

Deity: A god.

Diplomacy: The use of skillful negotiations with leaders of other nations to influence events.

Hagiography: An idealized biography, often of a saint.

Icon: In the Eastern Orthodox Church, an image of a saint.

Legal code: A system of laws.

Madonna and Child: Mary and the baby Jesus, as depicted in religious art.

Middle class: A group in between the rich and the poor, or the rich and the working class; usually considered the backbone of a growing economy.

Missionary: Someone who travels to other lands with the aim of converting others to his or her religion.

Nimbus: A halo-like cloud said to hover around a deity or exalted person.

Patriarch: A bishop in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Plague: A disease that spreads quickly to a large population.

Protectorate: A state dependent on a larger, stronger state for military protection.

Siege: A sustained military attack against a city.

Strait: A narrow water passageway between two areas of land.

stantinople (kahn-stan-ti-NOH-pul), but later scholars used its old name of Byzantium (bi-ZAN-tee-um) to identify the entire Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine people, however, called themselves Romans, and their land the Roman Empire, which thus continued to exist in the East for another thousand years after the fall of the West.

In 500 Byzantium held most of the lands formerly controlled by the Eastern Roman Empire, including

Greece and what is now Bulgaria, Asia Minor, a strip of land from Syria to Palestine, Egypt, and part of Libya. But Justinian (483–565; ruled 527–565), the greatest of Byzantine rulers, resolved to undertake the re-conquest of the Western Roman Empire from the barbarians. His brilliant general Belisarius (c. 505–565) won back North Africa from the Vandals in 534, and Italy from the Ostrogoths in 540. The Byzantines also took southern Spain from the Visigoths in 550.



A map of Eastern Europe in the eleventh century indicating the lands under the control of the Byzantine Empire as well as those controlled by Kievan Russia.

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These victories were costly, however, and except for a few parts of Sicily and southern Italy, the Byzantines did not hold their conquests for long. The empire soon had other troubles as well. Beginning in 541, a plague devastated Byzantium, and by the time it ended in the mid-700s, it had killed millions of people. Aside from everything else, this meant that the empire's tax revenues decreased dramatically, leaving it unable to pay for its armies. Enemies, including the Slavs, attacked from all sides, and the first successful rebellion in some three

hundred years ended the life of the emperor Maurice (ruled 582–602). For more than a century, the empire was almost constantly at war with Persia, which conquered all Byzantine lands south of Asia Minor, and it was only with the help of the church that Heraclius (hair-uh-KLY-us; ruled 610–41) was able to hold on to Constantinople itself. It seemed that things could not get worse—but they did.

When the even more powerful Arab caliphate replaced the Persians, Byzantium seemed doomed. Yet

thanks to reorganization of the military by Constans II (ruled 641–68), the Byzantines put up a strong defense of their homeland. They reached a turning point in 718, when the Arabs were forced to give up the siege of Constantinople. This had enormous significance for future history: if the Arabs had defeated the Byzantines, they would undoubtedly have conquered and forcibly converted Western Europe—which lacked unifying leadership at the time—to Islam.

By the 900s, Byzantium was on the offensive again, reconquering old territories and dealing severely with a tribe called the Bulgars, who had long posed a threat. These conquests reached their peak under Basil II (BAZ-ul; ruled 976–1025), nicknamed “The Bulgar-Slayer.” Basil annexed Bulgaria in 1014, and by 1025 the empire had reached a second high point. Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon were gone forever, but the Byzantine lands and protectorates stretched from southern Italy to Armenia, and from Croatia to Syria.

The Byzantine system

Justinian had laid the foundations for modern law with his legal code, or system of laws, completed in 535. Roman law dated back almost a thousand years, but Justinian’s Code greatly simplified and organized it. Byzantium also had an excellent and highly organized civil service. Placed as they were between many lands in Europe and Asia, the Byzantines had to become skilled at diplomacy, or the art of negotiation. They also became mas-

ters at playing their enemies against one another; but when they had to go to war, they were a mighty force.

Having adapted to changing times, the Byzantines developed a strong cavalry, along with something the earlier Roman Empire had lacked: a powerful navy. In fact, the Byzantine fleet used the first modern-style chemical weapon, “Greek fire.” The latter was a combination of petroleum, salt peter, quicklime, and sulphur; when sprayed on an enemy’s ship it would cause it to burn.

One of the most significant military-related developments, however, had nothing to do with actual fighting. This was the reorganization of the army by Constans II in the mid-600s, an act that may well have saved the empire. With funds running low, he gave soldiers plots of land called “themes” and made them self-supporting. This not only saved money, but also promoted good will with the troops and encouraged a stronger defense, since now the soldiers were defending their own land.

The economy

The “themes” bear some resemblance to aspects of Western European feudalism. Certainly both Byzantine and Carolingian society were made of similar elements: a tiny elite consisting of royalty, nobility, priests, and military; and a vast mass of toiling peasants. The lives of the peasants may not have been much better than those of their counterparts in Western Europe, but thanks to the efforts of



Mosaic of Justinian and his court from the Church of San Vitale. Justinian was the greatest of the Byzantine emperors. *Reproduced by permission of the Granger Collection Ltd.*

the Orthodox Church, literacy was much more widespread in Byzantium.

The Byzantine Empire even managed to create a middle class, something virtually unknown in the West until the 1000s. Typically these were merchants who profited from the extensive trade routes running through Byzantium, linking Europe and Asia. Thus Constantinople became known as a crossroads for the world and emerged as a most splendid city. At a time when Rome had perhaps 30,000 inhabitants, the Byzantine capital boasted a quarter-million people.

Byzantine culture

From an early time, it was clear that there was not really just one Christian church. The Catholic Church conducted its services in Latin, the Orthodox Church in Greek. Catholics looked to the pope for leadership, members of the Orthodox faith to the *patriarch* (PAY-tree-ark) or bishop of Constantinople. Gradually the Orthodox church came to have its own saints, its own holidays, and its own rules concerning marriage among the clergy.

At the heart of the division between churches was a debate about the identity of Jesus Christ: for Western



The Nika Revolt

Byzantine society in the 500s was dominated by two groups, the Blues and the Greens. The names came from the colors of their respective horse-racing teams, who competed regularly at the Hippodrome, or race track. Horse races in Byzantium were much more important than they are today: by cheering for the emperor's horse or that of a challenger, a citizen was making a political statement, and rivalries could often lead to violence.

It is not surprising, then, that a dispute that originated in the Hippodrome on January 13, 532, ended in massive bloodshed. This was the Nika Revolt, so named because *Nika!* or "Conquer!" was the favorite cheer of spectators at the races. In this particular instance, both the Greens and the Blues joined forces against the em-

peror Justinian, who had placed extraordinarily high taxes on his people and imprisoned members of both factions.

With an angry crowd gathering outside his palace, Justinian found himself unable to make a decision and began listening to advisors who suggested he should flee. It was then that the Empress Theodora (c. 500–548) stepped in and told him to act bravely: "For my own part," she said, "I hold to the old saying that the imperial purple makes the best burial sheet"—in other words, it is better to die defending the throne than to run away. Justinian listened to his wife's counsel and dispatched an army led by his general Belisarius to deal with the revolt. They trapped the rioters in the Hippodrome, where they massacred some 30,000 of them and reestablished order.

Christians, there could be no doubt that Christ *was* God, whereas most Eastern Christians maintained that the two were separate. In worldly matters, West and East also differed in their views on the relationship between church and state. In Western Europe, popes and kings vied for leadership, but in Byzantium the emperor's power was clear. He could even exercise final say in choosing the patriarch of Constantinople, and the Byzantines viewed the position of the emperor (though not necessarily any individual holding that position) as sacred.

In fact depictions of emperors and empresses in Byzantine art made use of an ancient pagan symbol called the *nimbus*, which was said to hover around a deity. Oddly, this was one of the few aspects of Byzantine culture that made an impact on the West, where artists began using a related symbol, the halo; but haloes were for Jesus, Mary, or the saints—not for rulers.

Iconoclasm

In the Byzantine world, the relationship between art, religion, and

politics was a complicated one, and never more so than in the dispute over Iconoclasm (eye-KAHN-oh-klazm). The latter was the name for a movement, supported by Emperor Leo III (ruled 717–41), which held that all “icons,” or images of religious figures, were idols, and hence went against Christian teachings. Under orders from Leo, icons were forbidden, and many existing ones were destroyed. A number of priests died trying to stop soldiers from tearing down statues, and under Constantine V (ruled 741–75) the persecution became even more vigorous.

Many medieval European rulers earned a title to distinguish them from others of the same name, a word or phrase that characterized the man, his reign, or his greatest achievement: thus Pepin III was known as “Pepin the Short,” and Basil II became “the Bulgar-Slayer.” Constantine’s title—Copronymus, which means “name of dung”—says a great deal about the Byzantine reaction to Iconoclasm, which became more and more unpopular as the violence associated with it continued. Western church leaders meanwhile shared in the Byzantines’ growing distaste for the Iconoclastic movement: indeed, Iconoclasm never had many supporters in the West, where few people could read. Images were an essential part of worship in Western Europe, and any attack on artwork was seen as an attack on Christianity itself.

Eventually the anti-Iconoclast movement—the Iconophiles (eye-KAHN-oh-fylz)—gained an important supporter on the throne, yet this did

little to win favor with the pope in Rome. The new Byzantine ruler was a ruthless one; however, the real problem was that this emperor was an empress: Irene (ruled 780–802). It was considered bad enough that a woman ruled the empire, but she added insult to injury by using her authority to call the Second Council of Nicaea, which condemned Iconoclasm in 787.

The meeting was designated the seventh ecumenical council, implying that it brought together all Christians. In fact the split between East and West was only widening, and the pope’s crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in 800 was in part a reaction to Irene: since it was illegal for a woman to rule the Byzantine empire, the pope could claim that the Roman throne was vacant, and thereby crown Charlemagne. This in turn angered the Byzantines, who felt that the papacy had challenged their claim as the rightful heirs to the Roman Empire.

Byzantine art

As they became more cut off from “barbarian” Western Europe, the Byzantines became convinced that theirs was a superior culture that must be preserved unchanged. It is easy to understand how they believed this: there was their glorious Greek past, not to mention the fact that for many centuries, Byzantium was the only real civilization on the European continent. Thus the Byzantines developed a highly static, or unchanging, worldview.

This static quality translated to their art, which was brilliant if a bit



A mosaic depicting a Byzantine Madonna and Child. This mosaic is from the Hagia Sophia, the church completed under Justinian's orders in 537. Reproduced by permission of the Corbis Corporation.

stiff. Iconoclasm caused Byzantine artists to develop a strong sense of abstract form—that is, designs and other non-representational shapes—but there was also a reaction to Iconoclasm; thus in the end, Byzantine art was more highly image-oriented than ever. Painting relied heavily on formal depictions of the Madonna and Child (Mary and the baby Jesus), as Western European art did later. The human figure in Byzantine art was elongated, with people's bodies much taller in

proportion to head size than they really were. Babies looked like small adults, without the relatively large heads and “baby fat” that distinguishes real babies.

The Byzantines were masters in the form called *mosaic* (moh-ZAY-ik), usually created by arranging colored bits of glass or tile to form a picture. The most famous Byzantine mosaics are those depicting Justinian and Theodora in the Church of San Vitale at Ravenna, built during the brief Byzantine occupation of Italy. The greatest example of Byzantine architecture, however, was not the church in Ravenna but the Hagia (HAH-jah) Sophia in Constantinople. Built by Justinian, the Hagia Sophia was completed in 537 and quickly became recognized as one of the most magnificent structures in the world. It was dominated by a dome that, despite its enormous size—184 feet high and 102 feet wide—seemed to float over thin air. In fact it rests on four arches and the stone piers upholding them.

The Slavic peoples

Among the countless peoples inhabiting what is now western Russia during Roman times, later to be swept westward by the Huns, was a group called the Slavs. Twice they invaded the Byzantine Empire during its troubled years, but eventually they settled down and became mixed with the Avars, Bulgars, and Khazars, other nomadic groups in the region. Slavs and



The Hagia Sophia, built by Justinian, is the greatest example of Byzantine architecture. It was built in the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, which is now Istanbul, Turkey. Reproduced by permission of Archive Photos, Inc.

Bulgars founded the first Slavic kingdom, Bulgaria, whose independence Byzantium recognized in 716.

In the 800s, two Byzantine missionaries, the brothers Cyril (SEER-ul; c. 827–869) and Methodius (mi-THOH-dee-us; c. 825–885), began preaching the Christian message in what is now the Czech Republic. This ultimately led to the conversion of the Bulgarians, whose King Boris embraced Eastern Orthodoxy in 865. In a pattern that would be repeated throughout Slavic lands, conversion did not spread upward from the people; rather, it went

from the top down, with the king ordering his subjects to convert. Around the same time, the Byzantine protectorate of Serbia accepted Orthodoxy as well. St. Cyril even developed an alphabet, based on Greek letters, which the newly converted peoples adopted, and which Slavic Orthodox nations use today: the Cyrillic alphabet.

Catholic nations

Some eastern European peoples, while linguistically and ethnically Slavic, embraced Roman Catholi-



Byzantine Literature: Tall Tales and Gossip

Byzantine literature is remembered for two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, there was the literature of *hagiography* (hay-jee-AHG-ruh-fee), official biographies of the Eastern Orthodox saints. These were a mixture of truth and legend, designed to provide readers both with entertainment and a moral lesson. Hagiography exaggerated the best qualities of the subject. On the other hand, Byzantium's gossip historians (who also sometimes presented tall tales as fact) often tried to make people seem worse than they were, not better.

Such was the case with Procopius (pruh-KOH-pee-us), a historian of the 500s. Though he wrote a highly acclaimed account of Justinian's wars of conquest, Procopius secretly held deep grudges against the emperor, the empress Theodora, and

others. Therefore he wrote a work in which he told what he *really* thought. Procopius's *Secret History* was not published until many centuries after his death, and no wonder: had it been discovered, he would undoubtedly have been executed. Its chapters have titles such as "Proving That Justinian and Theodora Were Actually Fiends [i.e., demons] in Human Form."

The empress had been a prostitute in her younger days, and Procopius spared no detail regarding her shady past, his account at times verging on pornography. Other historians, by contrast, offer positive accounts of Theodora, and indeed it is hard to trust Procopius. He was a member of the Green faction, whereas Theodora supported the Blues, and this may explain some of his ill will.

cism. Instead of the Cyrillic alphabet, they adopted the Roman alphabet, used in virtually all Western nations (including the United States) today. Just to the north of Serbia was Croatia, whose people became a part of Charlemagne's empire, as did neighboring Slovenia. To the northeast was Hungary, one of the few nations in Eastern Europe that is neither Slavic nor Orthodox: its dominant Magyar population became Catholic after their defeat by Otto the Great in 955.

North of Hungary was Moravia, converted to Orthodoxy by Cyril and

Methodius. Later it would become Catholic after its conquest by Bohemia, itself converted during the 800s by German missionaries. Bohemia and Moravia, today part of the Czech Republic, would enjoy periods of great influence during the Middle Ages. Moravia briefly conquered a large area, including Slovakia to the east, in the late 800s; and during the 1200s Bohemia emerged as a great power.

Finally, there was the northernmost and most influential of the Slavic Catholic nations: Poland, whose king adopted Christianity in



This Bulgarian newspaper shows an example of the Cyrillic alphabet, which was developed by St. Cyril (c. 827–869). *Reproduced by permission of EPD Photos.*

966. Thus a large part of Slavic Eastern Europe was Catholic, yet to the east was a single Orthodox nation that became larger than all of Eastern Europe combined: Russia.

Kievan Russia

The region just north of the Black Sea has been inhabited since ancient times. All the tribes entering Europe from Asia, including not only the Huns and Turkic peoples but later the Mongols, passed through it; yet the Slavs remained. They were probably the founders of Kiev (kee-YEV), today

the capital of Ukraine. Then in 862 the Vikings known as the Varangians arrived from Sweden and established the city of Novgorod (NAWV-guh-rud). Eventually one of the Vikings, whose name was Rurik (died c. 879), emerged as their leader, and founded a dynasty that would remain influential until 1598.

Rurik extended Slavic influence north, into the land of the Finns; but the real empire-building began with Oleg (died c. 912), who merged Kiev and Novgorod into a single entity called Kievan Rus or Kievan Russia. Oleg's daughter-in-law Olga accepted



St. Basil's Church, located in Moscow, Russia, is a magnificent example of an Eastern Orthodox church. *Photograph by Susan D. Rock. Reproduced by permission of Susan D. Rock.*

Eastern Orthodoxy; however, her son rejected it for fear that it would make him a subject of Byzantium. Conversion came during the reign of Vladimir the Great (VLAHD-i-meer; c. 956–1015), who in 987 agreed to marry Anne, the sister of the Byzantine Empire's mighty Basil II.

Vladimir set about forcibly converting Kiev and Novgorod while Basil occupied himself with the Bulgars. A power struggle followed the death of Vladimir, but Yaroslav the Wise (yuh-ruh-SLAHF; ruled 1019–54) restored order and began building a

vast Russian empire that stretched the length of Eastern Europe, from the Gulf of Finland to the Black Sea.

The turning point for Eastern Europe

After 1054 and the death of Yaroslav, Kievan Russia began to decline, torn apart by rivalries between various city-states. Turkic nomads, by then a powerful force in Eastern Europe, became more involved in Russian affairs, and in 1097 a group of Russian nobles divided the empire with them. This would make Russia

particularly vulnerable to the Mongol invasion about 150 years later.

The year 1054 also marked a turning point for Eastern Europe as a whole. It was then that the Eastern Orthodox Church formally broke with Rome over a number of issues, including clerical celibacy—that is, the question of whether priests could marry. Orthodox leaders held that they could and should; Rome, particularly after the split with the Orthodox Church, opposed marriage for priests.

Soon afterward, Byzantium experienced another, even more significant, turning point: its loss to the Turks at the Battle of Manzikert in Armenia in 1071. The Turks even took the Byzantine emperor prisoner, and soon afterward helped themselves to all of Asia Minor, thenceforth known as Turkey. Thus less than fifty years after the victories of Basil II, Byzantium lost everything it had gained, and though the empire would continue for three more centuries, Manzikert was a blow from which it would never recover.

For More Information

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How Basil Became the Bulgar-Slayer

In the 980s, Bulgaria's King Samuel (ruled 980–1014) began creating an empire to the north of Byzantium, one that ultimately included parts of Bulgaria, Macedonia, northern Greece, Serbia, and Albania. He even declared himself *czar* (ZHR)—Slavic for “caesar.”

The Byzantines' Basil II rightly saw this as a threat, and the two empires went to war. It took decades to subdue the Bulgarians, but Basil won the decisive Battle of Belasitsa on July 29, 1014. His army captured some 14,000 Bulgarian soldiers, and gouged their eyes out; every hundredth man, however, was allowed to keep one eye so he could lead the other ninety-nine home. It was said that when Czar Samuel saw his army limping home, he died of a heart attack.

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