

Chapter 6

The Byzantine Empire

How did the Byzantine Empire develop and form its own distinctive church?

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will learn about the Byzantine Empire. This great empire lay in two continents, Europe and Asia. It lasted from about 500 to 1453 C.E., when it was conquered by the Ottoman Turks.

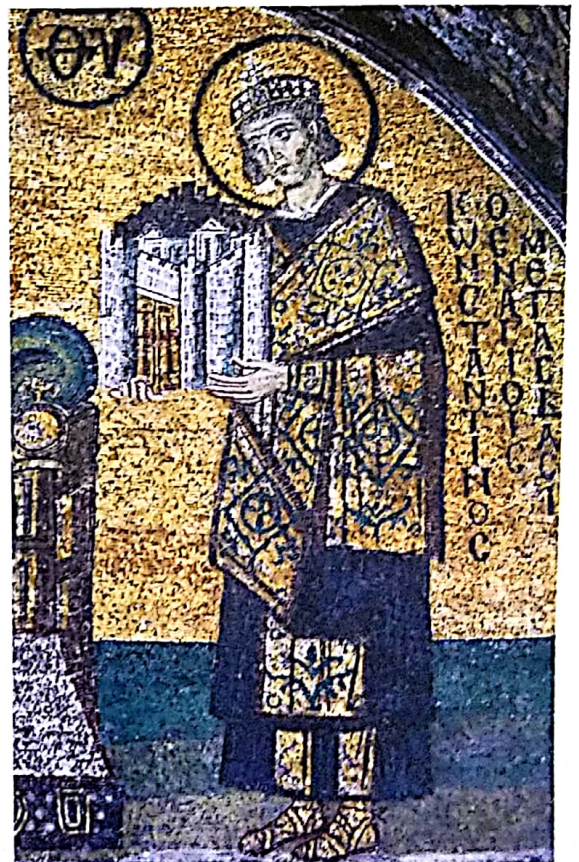
At first, the Byzantine Empire was the continuation of the Roman Empire in the east. In 330 C.E., the Roman emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to the city of Byzantium. This city was an old Greek trading colony on the eastern edge of Europe. Constantine called his capital New Rome, but it soon became known as Constantinople, which is Greek for “Constantine’s City.”

Later, control of the huge original empire was divided between two emperors—one based in Rome and one based in Constantinople. After the fall of Rome, the eastern empire continued for another 1,000 years. We call this the Byzantine Empire, after Byzantium, the original name of its capital city.

East and west remained connected for a time through a shared Christian faith. But the Church in the east developed in its own unique ways. It became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church. Over time, Byzantine emperors and Church officials came into conflict with the pope in Rome. The conflict eventually led to a permanent split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

In this chapter, you will learn about the Byzantine Empire, one of its greatest emperors, and its **distinctive** church. Let’s begin by exploring the empire’s capital—the fabulous city of Constantinople.

◀ This modern drawing re-creates the city of Constantinople during the Byzantine Empire.



In 330 C.E., the emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to the city of Byzantium.

Constantinople the city on the eastern edge of Europe, which Constantine made the capital of the Roman Empire in 330 C.E.

Byzantine Empire the name for the eastern Roman Empire, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia; it lasted from about 500 to 1453 C.E.

6.2 Constantinople

Constantinople was more than 800 miles to the east of Rome. Why did Constantine choose this site to be the capital of the Roman Empire?

One reason was that the site was easy to defend. It was surrounded on three sides by water. The Byzantines fashioned a chain across the city's harbor to guard against seafaring intruders. Miles of walls, fortified by watchtowers, and gates discouraged invasion by land and by sea.

Constantinople also stood at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and the many sea and overland trade routes linking east and west. During the **Byzantine Empire**, this special location helped to make the city, and some of its citizens, very wealthy. For more than 700 years, Constantinople was the richest and the most elegant city in the Mediterranean region. Ivory, silk, furs, perfumes, and other luxury items flowed through its markets. A French soldier who saw the city in 1204 exclaimed, "One could not believe there was so rich a city in all the world."

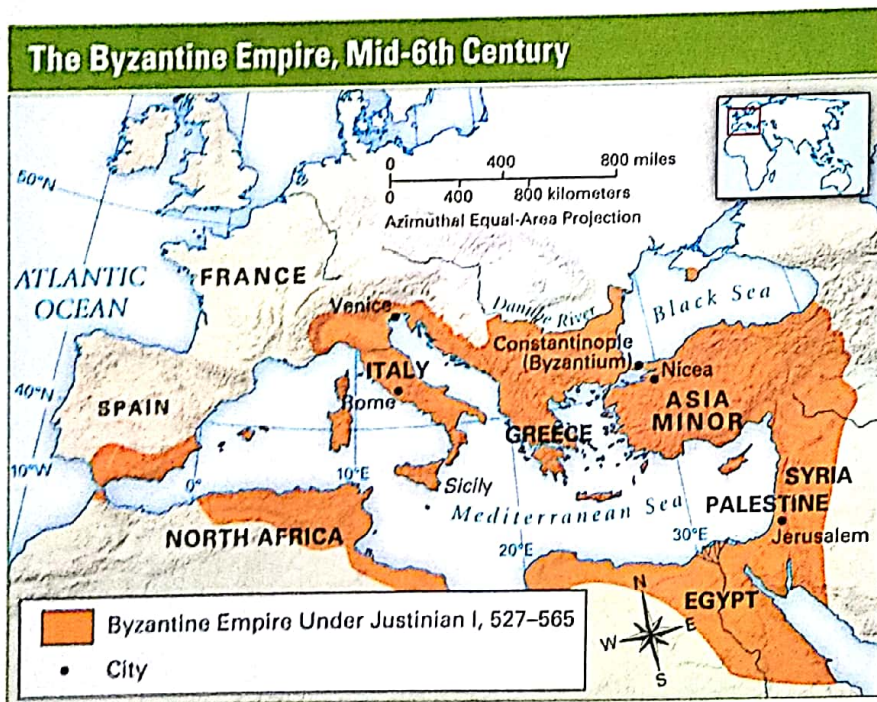
At its height, Constantinople was home to around one million people. The city's language and culture were Greek, but traders and visitors spoke many languages. Ships crowded the city's harbor, loaded with goods. The city streets, some narrow and twisting, some grand and broad, teemed with camel and mule trains.

Life in Constantinople was more comfortable than in Western Europe. The city boasted a sewer system, which was quite rare in medieval times. Social services were provided by hospitals, homes for the elderly, and orphanages.

Despite the luxuries enjoyed by the rich, many people lived in

poverty. The emperor gave bread to those who could not find work. In exchange, the unemployed performed such tasks as sweeping the streets and weeding public gardens.

Almost everyone attended the exciting chariot races at a stadium called the Hippodrome. Two chariot teams, one wearing blue and the other green, were fierce rivals. In Constantinople and other cities, many people belonged to opposing groups called the Blues and Greens after the chariot teams. At times the rivalry between Blues and Greens erupted in deadly street fighting. But in 532, the two groups united in a rebellion that destroyed much of Constantinople. You will find out what happened in the next section.



The eastern Roman Empire, later called the Byzantine Empire, ruled much of the Mediterranean world for several hundred years.

6.3 The Reign of Justinian I

One of the greatest Byzantine emperors was Justinian I, whose long reign lasted from 527 to 565. But Justinian's reign nearly came to an abrupt end much sooner. In January 532, the emperor and his beautiful wife, Theodora, were attending chariot races at the Hippodrome. In the past, Blues and Greens among the spectators had often fought with each other. This time, however, both groups were upset over the arrests of some of their members. To Justinian's horror, they united in denouncing him. Fighting broke out, spilled into the streets, and escalated into a full-scale rebellion.

The rioting continued for a week while Justinian and Theodora hid in the palace. Much of the city was in flames. Justinian's advisors wanted him to flee the city. Theodora, however, urged him to stay and fight. With her encouragement, Justinian put down the revolt. According to the official court historian, Procopius (pro-KOH-pee-us), 30,000 people were killed in the fighting. The city of Constantinople lay in ruins.

Justinian was determined to rebuild the city on a grand scale. He put huge sums of money into public works. Soon, Constantinople had new bridges, public baths, parks, roads, and hospitals. The emperor also built many grand churches, including the magnificent Hagia Sophia (AH-ee-yah SOH-fee-uh). Its name is Greek for "Holy Wisdom." Today, this great structure is one of the most famous buildings in the world.

Besides rebuilding Constantinople, Justinian tried to reclaim some of the Roman Empire's lost territory. He launched military campaigns that, for a time, took back parts of North Africa, Italy, and Spain.

Justinian is most famous, however, for creating a systematic body of law. Under his direction, a committee studied the thousands of laws the Byzantines had inherited from the Roman Empire. They revised outdated and confusing laws. They also made improvements, such as extending women's property rights. The result of their work is known as Justinian's Code. It became the basis for many legal codes in the western world.

Procopius, the court historian, wrote glowing accounts of Justinian's achievements. But he also wrote the *Secret History*, in which he called the emperor "a treacherous enemy, insane for murder and plunder." Throughout Byzantine history, distrust and divisions often plagued the imperial court. Justinian's court was no exception.



The Granger Collection, New York

During a revolt in Constantinople, the empress Theodora (third from the left) encouraged her husband, Justinian I, to stay and fight for his city.



Hagia Sophia was built between the years 532 and 537. Its architectural features inspired the design of many later Orthodox churches.

Eastern Orthodox Church a Christian religion that developed out of early Christianity in the Byzantine Empire

6.4 The Eastern Orthodox Church

To the Byzantines, Christianity was more than a religion. It was the very foundation of their empire.

When Constantine built his new capital, he intended it to be the religious center of the empire, as well as the seat of government. Constantine himself tried to settle religious disputes by assembling a council of bishops.

Over time, the Byzantine Church separated from the Church in Rome and became known as the **Eastern Orthodox Church**. The word *orthodox* means “in agreement with right belief.” The leaders of the medieval Eastern Orthodox Church thought that their church was based on a set of beliefs that they could trace back to Jesus Christ and to the work of bishops in early Christian councils.

The Role of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Empire

Religion and government were more closely linked in the Byzantine Empire than in the west. The Byzantines viewed the emperor not just as the head of the government but as the living representative of God and Jesus Christ. This meant that church and state were combined into one all-powerful body.

The state religion also united people in a common belief. The Eastern Orthodox Church played a central role in daily life. Most people attended church regularly. Religious sacraments gave shape to every stage of the journey from birth to death. Monasteries and convents cared for the poor and the sick. These institutions were supported by wealthy people and became quite powerful. Let's look at some of the practices of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Church Hierarchy Like Roman Catholic clergy, Orthodox clergy were ranked in order of importance. In Byzantine times, the emperor had supreme authority in the Church. He selected the **patriarch** of Constantinople, who ranked just below him in matters of religion.

Unlike the pope in the west, the patriarch did not claim strong authority over other patriarchs and bishops. Instead, he was “first among equals.” The patriarch of Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey) still holds this honor.

Orthodox priests served under patriarchs and other bishops. Unlike Roman Catholic priests, who were not allowed to marry, many Orthodox priests were married. Bishops, however, could rise only from the ranks of unmarried clergy.

Liturgy and Prayer The Orthodox Church service corresponding to the Roman Catholic mass was the Divine Liturgy. Both the clergy and worshippers sang or chanted the liturgy, or form of public worship. The liturgy was conducted in Greek or in the local language.

Orthodox Christians also prayed to saints. Two saints were particularly important. Saint Basil promoted charity and reformed the liturgy. Saint Cyril helped create the Cyrillic (sih-RIL-ik) alphabet, which allowed scholars to translate the Bible for people in Eastern Europe.

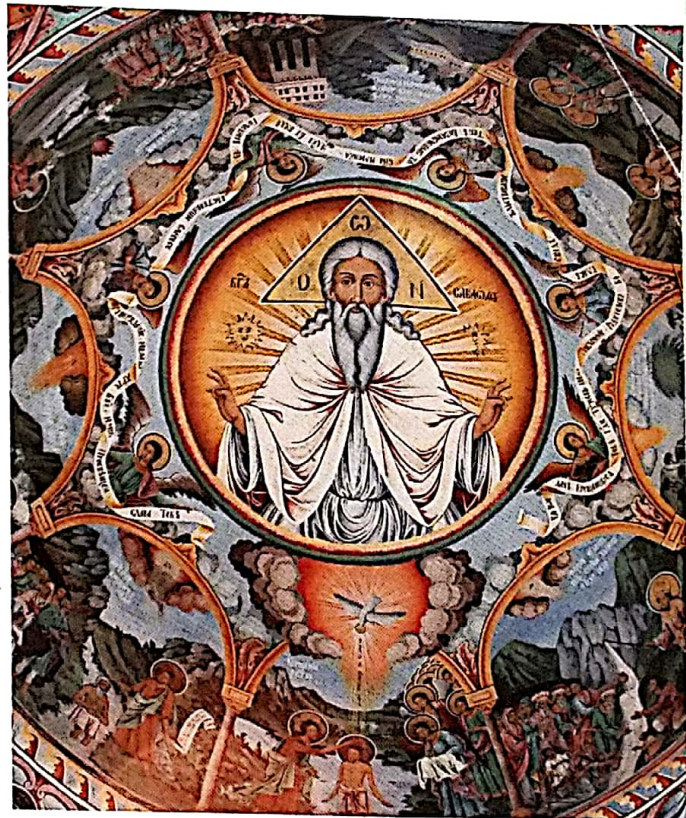
Architecture and Art Christian faith inspired magnificent architecture and artwork in the Byzantine Empire. With its square base and high dome, the cathedral Hagia Sophia served as a model for many Orthodox churches. The architecture of the church also reflects Orthodox views. The simple base represents the earthly world. Upon it rests the “dome of heaven.” Rich decorations on the inside were meant to remind worshippers of what it would be like to enter God’s kingdom.

Building on the Greek love of art, the Orthodox Church used many images in its services and prayers. Byzantine artists created beautiful icons, which were usually painted on small wooden panels. Artists also fashioned sacred images as mosaics and painted them in murals.

An image of Christ as the *Pantocrator*, or ruler of all, gazed down from the domes of all Orthodox churches. Most churches also displayed an icon of Jesus’s mother, Mary (called the *Theotokos*, or god-bearer) and the Christ child over the altar.

Many Byzantines believed that sacred pictures brought them closer to God. But later, icons also became a source of violent disagreement.

patriarch in the Eastern Orthodox Church, the bishop of an important city



A feature of Eastern Orthodox churches is an image of Christ the Pantocrator, like this one, watching over Orthodox worshippers from the dome above.