

TCI 6.2 The Byzantine Empire

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

Introduction

The great Byzantine Empire spread across two continents, Europe and Asia. This vast empire 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, 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.

The eastern and western parts of the original empire remained connected for a time through a shared Christian faith. However, 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, which eventually led to a permanent split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.



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 surrounded by water on three sides, making it easy to defend. 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 ideal 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,

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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.

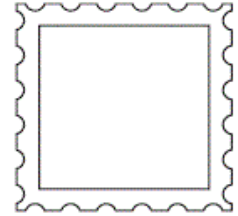
Despite the luxuries enjoyed by the rich, many people lived in poverty. The emperor gave bread to those who could not find work, but in exchange, the unemployed performed tasks such as sweeping the streets and weeding public gardens.

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 the Blues and Greens erupted in deadly street fighting. But in 532, the two groups united in a rebellion that destroyed much of Constantinople.



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Imagine that you are a trader visiting Constantinople for the first time. Write a few sentences to a friend back home describing the diversity, richness, and activities that you see as you walk through the city's streets. Design the postcard to show a scene from Constantinople. Include a title and caption for your postcard.



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A large empty rectangular box for drawing a scene from Constantinople.