Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire, or Byzantium, is the conventional modern name for the medieval Christian Greek-speaking empire that was created after the division of the Roman Empire into western and eastern parts, Byzantium being the eastern part of the empire. Contemporary Byzantines referred to their empire in Greek as *Romaike autokratoria* (Roman Empire) or *autokratoria ton Romaion* (empire of the Romans), regarding it as the continuation of the ancient Roman Empire; Westerners called it the "Greek Empire" or "Empire of the Greeks." The name Byzantium was only used by the people of the empire to describe the city of Constantinople, which was founded in the seventh century BCE by Byzas, a Greek from Megara; Byzantium never referred to the empire itself. The term Byzantine was introduced by Hieronymus Wolf in 1562. The Byzantine Empire was a multinational empire, composed primarily of Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and Slavs.

The history of the empire, the longest-lived of Western civilization, spans more than 11 centuries. There is no generally agreed date for the beginning of Byzantine (as opposed to Roman) history. Some modern scholars have suggested that it began in 324, when Emperor Constantine I the Great became *monokrator* (sole ruler) of the Roman Empire, or in 330, when Constantine transferred the capital of the empire from Rome to Constantinople. Others suggest 395, when Emperor Theodosius I the Great died and the empire was divided into western and eastern parts. Other suggested dates are the year 284, when Diocletian became emperor; the year 610, when Heraclius I became emperor; and the year 717, when the Isaurian dynasty ascended the throne of Constantinople. Most scholars agree, however, that the fourth century should be considered as the beginning of Byzantine history. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks (1453) can be regarded as its end, in spite of the fact that two Byzantine territories, the despotate of Mistra and the empire of Trebizond, fell to the Turks only in 1460 and 1461 respectively.

At the beginning of its existence, the borders of Byzantium coincided with those of the eastern Roman Empire. In the sixth century, Emperor Justinian I extended its frontiers to the Atlantic, capturing the southern part of Spain as well as northern African lands. In the following centuries the Arabs, Lombards, Slavs, and Normans deprived Byzantium of most of its territories outside the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor. In the last centuries of its existence, the empire was confined to the southern Balkans and western Asia Minor. At the beginning of the 14th century, it lost Asia Minor to the Turks; in the middle of that century, it had only eastern Macedonia and Thrace under its authority; and at the beginning of the 15th century, it was confined to Constantinople, a few islands in the Aegean Sea, and the despotate of Mistra in the Peloponnese.

Christianity was recognized as a legal religion by Constantine I in 313 and proclaimed as the official state religion by Theodosius I in 380. During this period, the first rift between the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Rome took place, while in six ecumenical synods, all of which took place in the eastern half of the empire and in all of which the Byzantine emperors were involved, the doctrine of the Christian faith was defined, and various heresies (including Arianism and Nestorianism) were proscribed. A religious controversy known as iconoclasm (or iconomachy) arose as a result of disputes among the Christians of the empire over the veneration of icons, beginning in 726. By its end in 843, it had devastated the empire financially and cost a number of emperors their
thrones because their views on iconoclasm did not coincide with those of the majority of the population at that time. On Christmas Day 800, the Frankish king Charlemagne (Charles the Great) was crowned by the pope in Rome as emperor and governor of the Roman Empire. From this time, the Byzantine Empire went from being an (ecumenical) "Roman" empire to a "Greek" empire in the political and ecclesiastical perceptions of Western Europe. In the 860s, dogmatic and ritual differences between the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Rome, together with a clash of personalities of their leaders, led to a rift, which was healed, however, in 886. In 1054, during the reign of Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus, the patriarchate of Michael Cerularius, and the pontificate of Leo IX, the Greek Orthodox and Latin Churches separated because of their ecclesiastical and theological differences, which were triggered by the intervention of the pope in bishoprics under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Constantinople.

In the middle Byzantine era, the empire succeeded in repelling a number of attacks by Arabs and Bulgarians. In 1071, however, it suffered severe territorial losses on two fronts. In eastern Anatolia, Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes suffered a disastrous defeat by the Seljuk Turks at the Battle of Manzikert, which resulted in the loss of a large part of the Byzantine lands in Asia Minor. In Italy, the Normans seized Bari, the last Byzantine territory on the peninsula. During the reign of the first two emperors of the Comnenid dynasty, Byzantium managed to recover some of its territorial losses of the previous decades. These successes were reversed in 1176 when the Byzantines suffered another crushing defeat at the hands of the Turks at the Battle of Myriocephalum in Asia Minor.

During the rule of the Comnenid (1081–1185) and the Angelid (1185–1204) dynasties, the presence of Westerners in the eastern Mediterranean changed the political, military, and financial status quo in the region. The Norman conquerors of southern Italy, with their many attacks against Byzantine lands, posed a serious threat to the empire, and the Italian naval cities, thanks to the commercial privileges they had been granted by the Byzantine emperors, gained control of trade in the eastern Mediterranean and thus reduced Byzantium's financial resources. The first commercial privileges were granted to Venice in 1082 as the direct result of the military pressure Byzantium was under from the Normans. In the treaty of May 1082 between Byzantium and Venice, the latter promised to support the Byzantine Empire against the Normans and in return received, among other privileges, an annual tribute and tax-free trading privileges in the empire.

In the 1090s, it was the Seljuk Turks who posed the most serious threat to the Byzantine Empire. After the crushing defeat at the Battle of Manzikert, the Byzantines were unable to put a halt to Turkish advances, which led to the capture of the town of Nicaea in 1081, the establishment of the sultanate of Rum in Bithynia, and the loss of the important city of Antioch on the Orontes in Syria in 1085. In March 1095, a Byzantine embassy sent by Alexius I Comnenus to Pope Urban II appealed for military aid in the struggle against the Turks. The series of expeditions now known as the First Crusade (1096–1099) was the help that the Byzantines were offered by the West against the Turks. Between summer 1096 and May 1097, the arrival of the crusaders in the Byzantine Empire brought its authorities and the local population face-to-face with unfamiliar and threatening attitudes and practices. The Byzantines did help the crusaders militarily, however. After transporting them to Asia Minor, they joined them in besieging the capital of the sultanate of Rum, Nicaea, which in June 1097 surrendered to the Byzantine emperor.

The newly established Norman Principality of Antioch, under Bohemond I, proved to be a constant source of worry to the Byzantines. When they reoccupied Tarsos, Adana, Misis, and Laodikeia in Syria, Bohemond went to Europe to organize a crusade against the Byzantine Empire. In 1107, the army that he assembled in the West landed in Valona and marched on Dyrrachium (Durazzo), where Byzantines and Normans met again outside the walls of the city, 25 years after their last encounter there. Bohemond was defeated and in 1108 signed a treaty with Emperor Alexius at Devol, according to which he was to rule over the Principality of Antioch as the Byzantine emperor's
vassal. The disputes between Byzantium and Antioch continued after the deaths of Alexius I and Bohemond I.

Manuel I Comnenus, John's son and successor, achieved a temporary success against the Frankish states. During his reign, the armies of the Second Crusade (1147–1149) passed through the empire. Manuel's achievements with regard to Outremer after the end of the Second Crusade were impressive. In 1158, he marched against the principality of Antioch and Cilicia, which in 1156 had attacked Byzantine Cyprus. Manuel forced the rulers of both states, Prince Reynald of Antioch and Prince Toros II of Armenia, to pay homage to him. In the same year, King Baldwin III of Jerusalem put himself under the protection of the Byzantine emperor and married one of Manuel's nieces, Theodora. In April 1159, Manuel entered Antioch in triumph.

The aim of the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204) was the liberation of the Holy Land from the Ayubids by means of an invasion of Egypt, but lack of funds to pay the Venetians the agreed costs of naval transport to the Levant was the main reason for the diversion of the crusade against the town of Zara, which they captured and plundered. The crusaders were then invited to turn against Byzantium by an exiled Byzantine prince, the future Alexius IV, to restore his father, Isaac II Angelus, who had been deposed in 1195. Alexius IV Angelus promised the crusaders and the Venetians a large sum of money, committed himself to assist the crusade after his father had been restored to the throne, and promised to work toward the reunification of the Greek Orthodox and Latin churches. A few months later, after Alexius had failed to fulfill his promise to pay the crusaders, they besieged Constantinople, capturing the city in April 1204. For three days the Byzantine capital was ruthlessly sacked.

Apart from external enemies, the Byzantines now also faced civil wars and rebellions. Around the time of the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, a number of independent Greek states were established in the lands of the former Byzantine Empire, three of which played a dominant role in the political developments in the area in the first decades of the 13th century: the empire of Nicaea, the principality of Epirus, and the empire of Trebizond. Internal restlessness occurred during the reigns of Michael VIII Palaeologus and his successors. A civil war (1341–1347) was the worst civil conflict. After the end of the civil war, John VI Cantacuzenus ruled in the place of the young John V Palaeologus, thus interrupting for seven years the rule of the Palaeologans dynasty (1347–1354). Finally, when John V was restored to the throne, he had to face the rebellion of his son Andronicus IV Palaeologus and then of his grandson John VII Palaeologus. In this period, the empire was surrounded only by enemies. The continuing commercial privileges enjoyed by Italian maritime cities posed a threat to the existence of the empire. The Angevin dynasty that ruled southern Italy and Sicily was a serious threat to the integrity of the Byzantine Empire throughout the reign of Michael VIII. At the same time, the Ottoman Turks were consolidating their position in Asia Minor. By the beginning of the 14th century, the Byzantines had lost most of Bithynia (in northwestern Asia Minor) to them. In the 14th century, the Byzantine lands in northern and central Greece were captured by the Serbs, who deprived the Byzantine Empire of almost half of its lands.

In 1354, the Ottomans crossed over to Europe for the first time and captured the Gallipoli peninsula. By the end of the century, a number of Byzantine cities in the Balkans had succumbed, and in 1390 the last Byzantine stronghold in Asia Minor was captured by the Ottoman sultan Bayezid I. A Western-Balkan coalition against the Turks, the so-called Crusade of Nicopolis, ended in disaster in 1396. It was mainly thanks to the defeat of the Turks by the Mongols at the Battle of Ankara in 1402 that the Byzantine Empire managed to survive for a further 50 years.

Aid from abroad was desperately needed for the empire, but the means that were employed to achieve this occasionally caused more problems in the empire. Attempts to heal the schism between the Orthodox and Latin Churches at the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1439) were followed by internal unrest in the Byzantine Empire, whose population was divided into "unionists" and "anti-unionists." Pope Eugenius IV appealed to Western rulers for a crusade against the Turks, and in the summer of 1443, about 25,000 crusaders, Hungarians, Serbs,
and Vlachs were assembled. In November 1444, the Hungarians and the crusaders besieged Varna but were defeated by the Turks. The Crusade of Varna was the last attempt in the Byzantine era for a coordinated Christian offensive against the Turks. When Emperor Constantine XI Palaeologus ascended the throne in 1448, only military help from the West could offer the empire any hope of survival. The much needed aid from the West did not arrive on time, and Constantinople fell to the Turks on May 29, 1453, followed by the despotate of Mistra in 1460 and the empire of Trebizond in 1461.

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Entry ID: 1349403