

Byzantine Empire Summary

The Western Roman Empire crumbled in the fifth century as it was overrun by invading Germanic tribes. By this time, however, the once great empire had already undergone significant changes. It had been divided into western and eastern empires, and its capital had moved east from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium. The city would become known as Constantinople after the emperor Constantine, who made it the new capital in 330 CE. For nearly a thousand years after the collapse of the Western Empire, Byzantium and its flourishing capital would carry on the glory of Rome.

A New Rome in a New Setting

Roman leaders had divided the empire in 395, largely due to difficulties in communications between the eastern and the troubled western parts of the empire. Still, rulers in the East continued to see themselves as emperors for all of Rome. Their politics were brutal—and often deadly. Emperors lived under constant risk of assassination.

Life in the New Rome

Emperor Justinian set up a panel of legal experts to regulate Byzantium's increasingly complex society.

The panel created a single, uniform code known as the Justinian Code.

Justinian launched the most ambitious public building program ever seen in the Roman world. He rebuilt the crumbling fortifications of Constantinople, as workers constructed a 14-mile stone wall and repaired the massive fortifications along its land border. Justinian viewed churches as the most visible sign of the close connection between church and state in his empire. The crowning glory of his reign

was Hagia Sophia, which means "Holy Wisdom." Many visitors hailed it as the most splendid church in the Christian world.

Merchant stalls lined the main street and filled the side streets. Products from Asia, Africa, and Europe passed through these stalls. Food stands filled the air with the smell of their delicacies, while acrobats and street musicians performed. Citizens could enjoy free entertainment at the Hippodrome, which offered wild chariot races and performance acts. The Hippodrome held 60,000 spectators.

The Church Divides

Differences between the Eastern and Western churches, continued to grow. In 1054, matters came to a head when the pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other in a dispute over religious doctrine. Shortly afterward, Christianity officially split between the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East [this is referred to as the Schism "split"].

The Empire Falls

With the rise of Islam, Arab armies attacked the city. Russians attempted invasions of the city three times. In the 11th century, the Turks took over the Muslim world and fought their way slowly into Byzantine territory.

All of these attacks were unsuccessful thanks to the city's location by the sea, its naval fleet, and the secret weapon of Greek Fire (a highly inflammable liquid), and the Theodosian Walls. To take Constantinople, an army would need to attack by land and sea, but all attempts failed no matter who tried and what siege engines they launched at the city.

Slowly, the Byzantine Empire shrank under the impact of foreign attacks. By 1350, it was reduced to the tip of Anatolia and a strip of the Balkans. Yet thanks to its walls, its fleet, and its strategic location, Constantinople held out for another 100 years. Finally, the city fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

