

**Byzantine Empire**

 The Byzantine Empire, also referred to as Eastern Roman Empire, got its name from a Greek colony and an important port called Byzantion. In 330 it was rebuilt into the capital of the Roman Empire by the emperor Constantine the Great and renamed to Constantinople. After the Roman Empire was fragmented into Eastern and Western Roman Empires, the different effects on the development of both of the parts started to show.

The Eastern part – more densely populated, didn't have any problems with the manpower, was more active in production, the crafts and business were being developed, it was the centre of political and cultural life, it was not much touched by the Barbarian influence and attacks. Building of Constantinople and other important metropoles completed the superiority of the Eastern part.

The Western part - was significantly destroyed by the Barbarian raids, economically and culturally it started to fall behind, there was not enough manpower, it was more agriculturally oriented, overall, it started to stagnate and decline.

After the fall Western Roman Empire (476) the imperial title was transferred from Rome to Constantinople. At the beginning the efforts to bring back the Roman Empire prevailed in Byzantium. These efforts reached their peak during the reign of Justinian I (527 – 565), who was a very energetic sovereign leading attacks and extending the empire's territory, who led a strongly centralized form of policy.

He married Theodora, a lower-class woman (her father was a bear keeper in a circus), who, however, was his great supporter.

Thanks to his raids he reconquered North Africa, Egypt, the Balkans, the Italian Peninsula, and a part of the Pyrenees Peninsula.

One of Justinian's centralizing policy tools was his total of Roman legislation known as the Corpus Iuris Civilis. It consisted of 4 parts: Digesta or Pandectae – a compilation of older legal texts, Institutiones – a textbook explaining the principles of the Roman law, Codex Justinianeus – a collection of earlier issued imperial constitutions, and Novellae – a collection of new laws issued during Justininan´s reign.

Justinian I also introduced a tax reform – everybody had to pay taxes. The centralizing policy as well as the tax reform led to violent riots called the Nika riots, named after the motto the rioters chose and which meant “Win!” “Victory!” “Conquer!” The riots took place in 532 directly triggered by officials. The insurgents attacked the court and demanded ousting the author of the tax reform. The rebellion gained power and Justinian considered fleeing Constantinople. His wife Theodora however dissuaded him, saying: “Those who have worn the crown should never survive its loss. Never will I see the day when I am not saluted as empress!” In the end, Justinian used the Imperial troops against the rebels. They succeeded to storm the Hippodrome where the rioters were at that time and a massacre followed in which about 30.000 people were killed.

During Justinian's reign Constantinople was modernized, Hagia Sophia was built as a Christian temple. Its construction took 5 years (532 – 537). It had a huge dome with beautiful decor.

The imperial treasury was being constantly exhausted, that is why there was an urge to find new business routes to the east. He succeeded to break the Chinese silk monopoly when two monks smuggled eggs of silk worms from Central Asia back to Byzantium.

Throughout Justinian’s reign several natural disasters struck the Empire – earthquakes, grasshopper invasion, famine, plague, which meant a decline in the number of inhabitants.

After Justinian's death the Empire gradually lost its conquered territories and fell into a long-lasting crisis. In the Balkans it had to deal with the Bulgarians, the fights with whom were ended by the emperor Basil II the Bulgar Slayer in the 11th century. The Slavic nations were also dangerous but the biggest problem meant the Arabs from the east.

From the 11th century the ruling dynasties tried to strengthen the position of the empire with an army and centralization of power which however did not lead to major success. On the contrary, the Turks / Arabs gradually started occupying the territories of Byzantium which was unable to stop them due to bad national circumstances. On May 29, 1453 the Ottoman troops of Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople. Constantinople was renamed to Istanbul and the Christian temple Hagia Sophia was turned to a mosque. The conquest of Constantinople is seen as one of possible landmarks marking the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age.

Christianity in Byzantine Empire

Even throughout Justinian's reign, Christianity was one of the centralizing political tools. The citizens of Byzantium viewed themselves as Romans and orthodox Christians. The emperor was the representative of God on earth – in his person the highest earthly and Christian power were united, also known as Monophysitism. The emperor could accept and give a blessing in a temple, issue laws and Church regulations.

After Justinian's death there were fights at the Byzantine borders. To its rich territory the Slavs and Persians were pushing in, who conquered Jerusalem and Alexandria in the 7th century. The Byzantines however succeeded to conquer the Persian Empire and they made peace with the Persians. The Christ´s cross that was seized by the Persians in Jerusalem was returned to the Byzantines. To commemorate this a Feast of the “Exaltation of the Holy Cross” was held and in 631 it was festively installed in Jerusalem.

In the 8th century a religious conflict began – the fight between the worshippers and the adversaries of icons known as iconoclasm.

Byzantine emperor Leo III (717 – 740) issued an edict in 730, that forbade any type of icon worship – but in western Church the worshipping was fairly common. In Byzantium their destruction – iconoclasm began. Pope Gregor III, as the representative of the western Church, condemned the iconoclasm. It all also had a political background. The problem of iconoclasm persisted until 843, when the worshipping of icons in Byzantium was allowed again. The unity of the Church between the west and the east was severely disturbed.

In the 11th century the religious dispute between the east and the west stretching from the 9th century escalated in Photian schism (see below). Michael I Cerularius Patriarch of Tsargrad (Constantinople), who began to label the west as heretics, closed the churches and monasteries of Latin priests in 1053. The reaction of Pope Leo IX was an attempt for reconciliation. He sent envoys to Tsargrad but the Patriarch didn´t let them serve the divine liturgy so they placed the charter of excommunication against the Patriarch on the altar of Hagia Sophia Church. The Patriarch however did not back down and excommunicated the envoys as well as the pope. The split between the Western and Eastern Church ended and is known as the East – West Schism of 1054. The Church was officially divided to Western – Roman-catholic an Eastern – Greek-catholic.

Photian schism – since 847 Ignatius was the Patriarch of Constantinople, a pious and educated man. His position was difficult. The reign was in the hands of Caesar Bardas who caused offense due to his scandalous and immoral life. So, the Patriarch decided to take a vigorous step and publicly denied Bardas the holy communion. Immediately in 858 Ignatius was forced to give up the office of the patriarch into which Photios was installed. He was just a layman and fast, against all Church regulations, he accepted every ordaining. Pope Nicholas I refused to legitimise Photios the patriarch so Photios started his offensive against Rome. He excommunicated the pope and the western liturgy. The Council at Tsargrad (Constantinople) in 869 put an end to the schism. Patriarch Ignatius was reinstated and Photios was excommunicated.