

The Byzantine Empire

In 476 CE, the final Roman emperor was overthrown, and what was once the most powerful civilization in the world suddenly ceased to exist. Or did it? Today, we'll delve into the history of the Byzantine Empire—a successor state that not only survived the fall of Rome, but endured for another thousand years.

But first, a little background. By the end of the third century CE, the expansive Roman Empire was declining precipitously. Faced with political instability, social unrest, and economic woes, the emperor Diocletian decided the state had become too big to govern effectively. So, he divided it in two. The western half, where the capital city of Rome was located, continued to decline until it was eventually sacked and taken over by Germanic invaders. Meanwhile, the eastern half managed to hold its own. Noting the region's growing cultural and economic significance, in 330 CE, Roman emperor Constantine moved the capital to the cosmopolitan eastern city of Byzantium, later renamed Constantinople.

Here, Constantine made yet another major change: by legalizing and promoting a small but growing religion called Christianity. Until this point, Christians had been widely persecuted by the empire's predominantly pagan population. As the first emperor to convert, Constantine offered preferential treatment to fellow believers and even presided over important church proceedings. By the end of the century, Christianity was adopted as the official state religion, forever changing the culture of the region.

Still, life in the new Byzantine Empire was in many ways pretty similar to life in its predecessor—at least at first. Residents continued to think of themselves as Roman, though most spoke Greek instead of Latin, and rulers like Constantine promoted the same Greco-Roman culture that dominated the old empire. Like Rome in its heyday, Constantinople was fabulously wealthy—replete with libraries, public gardens, sporting arenas, and palaces. The empire and its capital became even more powerful under the emperor Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565. He implemented a universal legal code, established new trade routes, reclaimed much of the conquered Western Roman territory, and commissioned some of the empire's most significant and enduring artistic achievements, including the Hagia Sophia, which was at one point the world's largest church.

But things weren't all perfect. Justinian's reign saw an outbreak of plague that killed about a fifth of Constantinople's population. And frequent attacks from neighboring groups took a major toll on the empire, both politically and financially. Emperor Heraclius, who came to power in 610, responded by restructuring and expanding the military with the theme system, in which different provincial areas, called themes, became organized around the recruitment of troops from that region. This process was overseen by local landowners. Residents took pride in the military prowess of their theme, thus incentivizing enlistment. Though this system was able to keep some foreign invaders at bay, it transformed the once-cosmopolitan civilization into a relatively poor, heavily militarized society. And it introduced new political conflicts, as the landowners who controlled the troops stationed in their themes began to act independently of the emperor, effectively undermining the authority of the central government.

By this point, the Byzantine Empire had lost its richest provinces to Muslim conquests and exhausted its resources in a series of wars against the Persians. Still, the state managed to survive for a few more centuries, even experiencing a brief period of expansion in the ninth and tenth centuries with the capture of Crete, Cyprus, and Syria. But by the time Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, the bulk of the former empire had already been dissolved by crusaders into competing Greek and Latin realms, leaving little more than the capital city intact. Though the empire was no longer, its influence on religion and culture at the intersection of two continents continues to shape our world today.