

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# The Byzantine Empire

“Gettin’ Byzzy with It”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. By around 110 CE, the Roman Empire contained most of Europe, the northern coast of Africa, the Nile and the Middle East around the Mediterranean. It was generally a time of peace, but the empire’s size meant that when rebellions or invasions did occur, they were hard to respond to or crush because they often happened far from the center of power. Emperor Diocletian (245-316) decided to split the empire into two in 286 CE, and gave territory in the east to a co-emperor. The land in the west was divided into fiefs ruled by warlord kings, while the larger portion in the east was ruled out of Byzantium, a beautiful city where European and Asian cultures collided. The Eastern Roman Empire later became known as the Byzantine Empire, and it flourished for 1,000 years after its counterpart in the west fell.

Notes

2. The Byzantine Empire was influenced by Roman and Greek culture and history. Byzantium was Greek, and the people there spoke Greek rather than Roman Latin, though they considered themselves Romans. Emperor Constantine (274-337 CE) was an avid fan of Greco-Roman culture. He was also a Christian and promoted his faith whenever he could. In 330 CE, he renamed Byzantium Constantinople and made it the center of his empire. The city was wealthy—even richer than Rome. People were literate. There were libraries and stadiums, gardens and palaces. Constantinople was one of the world’s most important cities and the largest city during the Middle Ages. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks put an end to the Byzantine Empire by invading it, and now, Constantinople is Istanbul, the most populous city in Turkey.

Notes

3. When the Byzantine Empire was nearing its height of power, Justinian (483-565) became emperor. Like Constantine, he was a fan of the Greeks and Romans and worked to restore the grandeur of Rome. He took back much of the land that the Roman Empire had lost in Italy, Africa and Spain, and had his scholars dig up the old laws of Rome, the Twelve Tables. He made sure that there were no unchristian rules among them, and added his own. What resulted was called the Justinian Code. It officially granted people a new set of civil rights and paved the way for later documents like the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights.

Notes

4. Before becoming emperor, Justinian fell in love with Theodora, a woman who not only wasn't a noble, but was the daughter of a circus bear trainer. She'd joined the family business and performed in goofy and occasionally scandalous comedy shows. Determined to become her husband, Justinian changed the marriage laws so that emperors could marry actresses. Theodora ruled alongside Justinian and was very influential. She encouraged him to pass laws that promoted women's rights, including making it illegal for husbands to beat their wives. Theodora is probably most famous for convincing Justinian to stay and fight during the uprising in Constantinople in 532 instead of running and hiding. Together, they overcame the rebels and rebuilt the city. One of the buildings they had built was the Hagia Sophia, Church of the Holy Wisdom. One of the architectural wonders of the world, it still stands in Istanbul today.

Notes

5. The people of the Byzantine Empire were extremely religious. They were Christians, and they expressed their faith through their architecture, literature and art. One art form that flourished during the Byzantine Empire was the mosaic. Made from small tiles of ceramic or glass that sparkled or reflected light, mosaics typically depicted Christian scenes. When mosaics or paintings were portraits of important Christian figures, such as Jesus or saints, they were considered icons. Often painted with slightly elongated faces against a gold background, icons became very important in the Church. In Constantinople, it was common to cover walls and ceilings with them. Many people in the empire considered icons windows into heaven, and believed icons offered a direct connection to the person pictured. People who prayed to these images even claimed that they granted miracles.

Notes

6. Some important religious leaders weren't fans of icons. They believed that praying to an icon was a violation of the second commandment, which says not to worship images of God. These people were called iconoclasts, and the battle over icons became known as the iconoclastic controversy. In 726, Byzantine Emperor Leo III outlawed the worship of icons even though the Pope thought icons were fine. The Pope was (and still is) the leader of the Catholic Church, ruling from Rome. He wanted to allow icons because most people in Europe couldn't read; he thought icons helped them connect with their faith. The Pope declared opposition to icons to be a heresy, something that went against Church doctrine. Saying or doing something that is a heresy made you a heretic. This was no small thing; at various times in history, people have been killed and tortured for being heretics.

Notes

7. But the Pope wasn't about to kill or torture anyone. Instead, he threatened iconoclasts with excommunication—which kicked you out of the church. The iconoclastic controversy added to the tension between the Church leaders in Constantinople and Rome. The two cities were far apart and culturally different, which led to many disagreements about how things should be. Finally in 1054, tension reached a breaking point. In what is known as the Great Schism, the Christian Church split in half: In the West it was the Roman Catholic Church, and in the East, the Eastern Orthodox Church. The two churches remain separate to this day.

Notes