**The Byzantine Empire**

The Byzantine Empire was another name for the surviving eastern half of the Roman Empire. As you read in a previous chapter, the weaker western half of the Roman Empire, including the city of Rome, fell to barbarian invaders. What was left of the Roman Empire was ruled by the emperor in Constantinople. The Byzantine Empire survived for another 1,000 years, finally falling to the [Ottoman Turks](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) in 1453.

Although the people of the Byzantine Empire considered themselves Roman, the East was influenced by Greek culture, rather than the Latin of the West. People spoke Greek and wore Greek-styled clothing. The emperors and empresses wore beautiful silk and purple-dyed clothing, with expensive slippers. The Byzantine Empire was influenced by the Hellenistic culture created by the conquests of Alexander the Great. Learning and trade thrived in the Byzantine Empire. As you read in a previous chapter, Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of Christians, and Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity had a major influence on the Byzantine Empire. Byzantine art featured beautiful mosaics of Christian themes.

**Emperor Justinian**

One famous Byzantine Emperor was Justinian I. Justinian ruled from AD 527 to 565. Justinian created a set of laws called the Justinian [Code](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589). This code said that the emperor made all of the laws and interpreted the laws as well. The Justinian Code was law throughout the empire. Many of our modern laws can be traced back to the Justinian Code.

A still more resonant aspect of his legacy was the uniform rewriting of Roman law, the [*Corpus Juris Civilis*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corpus_Juris_Civilis), which is still the basis of [civil law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_law_(legal_system)) in many modern states.

Justinian had a goal of re-uniting the Roman Empire. He sent out armies to battle the [barbarians](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) who had taken control in the West. Justinian's Roman armies were very successful, taking back parts of Africa and most of Italy.

The war effort to take back the western part of the empire forced Justinian to raise taxes on the people of the Byzantine Empire. The Roman citizens were angry with Justinian about the high taxes for the war effort, and he was becoming unpopular. Even more unpopular was Empress Theodora, Justinian's wife, because she was originally a circus performer and came from the lower class of Romans. "Who was this woman, who had such control over the decisions of her husband?" They thought to themselves. Not one to take a back seat to her husband, Theodora proposed laws that protected the rights of women in the empire.

The Byzantines, like the old Romans in the West, enjoyed chariot races at the hippodrome, a large oval stadium designed for races. Like our modern sports, the Byzantines had teams they supported. The Byzantine chariot teams were named after colors: The Blues, Reds, Greens, and Whites. After a race, riots would, at times, break out in the stands and overflow into streets, as the fans got into arguments. During Justinian's reign, the Blues and Greens were the [dominant](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) teams.

After a particular riot, a fan of the Blues and a fan of the Greens were arrested. Justinian, noticing how unhappy people were with him, decided to free these two people and hold a chariot race on January 13, 532. During the race, fans got out of control, and started to shout insults at the emperor. Rather than cheering for their teams, fans of both the Greens and Blues shouted *Nika*, meaning win or conquer. Next, the fans stormed Justinian's luxury box, which was connected to his palace grounds. Justinian fled to the palace as the *Nika* Riot spilled out into the streets. The palace was under [siege](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) as most of the city, including the church called the Hagia Sophia (Church of Holy Wisdom), was destroyed.

A prisoner in his own palace, Justinian decided to board a ship and sail away from Constantinople, stepping down as emperor, but saving his life. As he started to leave, he looked behind him to find his wife, Theodora, stubbornly refusing. "I would rather die an empress, than live on the run, and besides, purple makes a wonderful burial veil," she said. Seeing his wife's courage, Justinian decided to stay. The riot was controlled, and Justinian continued to rule the Byzantine Empire.

Justinian set out to rebuild the city after the the *Nika* Riots. Justinian rebuilt the Hagia Sophia, which, after the rebuilding, had the largest dome in the world. The building is still standing today, although it is now a mosque, since the conquering Ottoman Turks were Muslim.

The type of Christianity practiced in Byzantium was called Eastern Orthodox. Eastern Orthodox Christianity is still practiced today. The head of the Eastern Orthodox Church is called the [Patriarch](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) of Constantinople. There were also men called bishops in the major cities of the Empire. In the Byzantine Empire, emperors had power over the church, because they selected the patriarch. Even though Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic are both Christian, they had arguments and even battles against each other. The pope, the spiritual leader in Rome and the Catholics in the West, and the patriarch of Constantinople did not always agree.

The Byzantine emperor was never totally safe. Unlike the barbarian kingdoms of the west, where the throne was passed from father to son, there was never a clear line of succession in the East. This was called the "[Malady](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) of the Purple," because any one with power could seize the throne in the Byzantine Empire. There were always plots to overthrow the emperor and much political [intrigue](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) in Constantinople, even among family and relatives.

In 672 the Byzantines rolled out a new weapon called Greek Fire. This fire was thrown at the enemy and could not be [extinguished](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589), not even by water. The person who is given credit for the invention of Greek Fire is Kallinikos, a Syrian living in the Byzantine Empire. Greek Fire was used against the attacking Muslim fleets. The formula for Greek Fire was a secret, and perhaps even the emperors did not know its ingredients. Greek fire was thrown in glass containers and [propelled](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1679589) by a pump. Greek Fire has been lost to history, and no one is absolutely sure how to make it today. Greek Fire helped to save the Byzantine Empire and Christianity for several hundred years. Constantinople finally fell to the cannons of the Turks in 1453. The walls of Constantinople fell down, but the culture and ideas of the Byzantine Empire moved to the Christian West, creating a new interest in classic Greek and Roman ideas, called the Renaissance.