



# BYZANTIUM:

## A GREEK, ROMAN, AND CHRISTIAN EMPIRE

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“Byzantium” is a conventional name given by modern historians (since the 16<sup>th</sup> century) to the state that continued the ancient Roman Empire in the East. The Roman Empire, we must remember, “fell” only in the West; in the East it continued until 1453 AD, when the Ottomans took the capital Constantinople. Constantinople [now Istanbul, Turkey] was founded on the site of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium by the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine I (in about 330 AD), and named after him. It was also called the Queen of Cities, the Ruling City, and, more officially, New Rome, because it was meant by Constantine as a duplicate of Rome, a “branch-office” of the imperial capital in the East. So, then, Byzantium was really nothing other than the Roman empire, which had existed in the East since the second century BC, the age of the great wars of the Roman Republic [Rome had an empire before it had an Empire]. In archaizing terms, the capital could be called *Byzantion* and its inhabitants *Byzantioi*, whence comes the modern usage of the name.

The Byzantine Empire had a long history, over 1,100 years, the longest continuous existence of any single state in history. In fact, there is no reason to separate its political history from that of its Roman predecessor, which means that we can extend its history back to the days of Augustus [14 AD] and even back before that, to the Roman Republic [founded around 510 BC; so it will make its life as many as 1963 years; 20 centuries]. The Byzantines were always aware that many of their political and social institutions went back to the days of the Republic. For example, the chariot teams of the hippodrome (the Blues, Greens, Reds, and Whites), who were still around in 1200 AD when the Crusaders arrived, went back to the days of the Roman kings (in the sixth century BC). So in terms of their nationality and political community, the Byzantines were thoroughly Roman.

The second component of Byzantine identity was Christian Orthodoxy. The Church was widely integrated into social life as well as the imperial system. All Byzantines were supposed to adhere to the same rite, liturgy, and doctrines, and by and large they did so. Religious art and architecture were remarkably uniform throughout the Empire, but there was no Inquisition. As Christians, the Byzantines recognized an affinity with Christians elsewhere, but this never led to an ecumenical Christianity that could challenge their Roman identity: Slavs and other orthodox nations were still regarded as barbarians and looked down upon. In this respect too, Byzantium was an ancient culture that survived into the Middle Ages.

The Byzantines’ system of dating was *am* [*anno mundi*] rather than AD [*anno Domini*], i.e., Year of the World rather than Year of the Lord. For them, the world was created in 5508 BC, so our 2007 year would be 7,515 *am*. So, just as in a political and national sense they regarded themselves as Romans, in a religious sense they were the True Israel, and traced their history symbolically back to the age of the Old Testament patriarchs like Abraham and Moses.

The third component of Byzantine culture was the Greek Language and ancient Greek literature. The spoken language had already begun to deviate from classical Greek already during the

early Roman Empire and in Byzantium was already very similar to modern Greek. This means that one had to study hard in order to learn ancient Greek, and this was something that few could afford to do. In this sense, however, a Byzantine could become a Greek, a *Hellene*, which meant one who had studied ancient Greek *paideia*, knew the philosophers, and could perform in Attic Greek. [The other sense of *Hellene* in Byzantium was “pagan,”



but this confusing meaning was mostly limited to the **Church**). This meant that in the sphere of literary culture the Byzantines had access to the most ancient body of literature, given that, compared to other languages, Greek has changed the least since the time of **Homer**. Many Byzantines took pride in this fact and defended Greek against other languages, especially **Latin**.

These, then, were the main components of **Byzantine civilization**. Their resilience and history gave Byzantium remarkable strength and continuity, but also flexibility too, or else it would not have survived for as long as it did. Let us also consider this: Byzantium is often depicted in the West as a true “*oriental*” civilization, more Asiatic than European, trapped in “medievalism” rather than pointing toward modernity. In fact, however, what all “western” countries have in common is that they trace their intellectual and literary **culture** back to **Greece**, their **laws** and systems of governance to **Rome**, and their religion to the **Christian Church**. In this respect, **Byzantium is the most western civilization of them all!** It was the most durable and perfect combination of those three historical elements.