

BYZANTINE EMPIRE

Origins

When the Roman Empire was declining, the emperor decided to divide the empire in half because he thought that it would make it easier to govern. Later on, while civil war ravaged the western half of the Empire, the eastern half of the empire was pretty stable and so Emperor Constantine decided to create a new capital at the former Greek city of Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). When the western half of the Roman Empire fell in 476, the Eastern half survived and thrived. This Eastern half of the Roman Empire later became known as the Byzantine Empire.

Geography

The Byzantine Empire, and its capital of Constantinople, held a strategic geographical significance. Constantinople is located right between the Black Sea and the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. As a result most trade between Asia, Europe and North Africa had to pass through the Byzantine Empire. Due to this strategic location, the Byzantine became a very wealthy empire for a time.

Christianity

Since the Byzantine Empire had once been part of the Roman Empire its peoples were also Christians. However in 1054, there was a dispute over the worship of icons. The Christian authorities in the Byzantine disagreed with Rome and did not believe that it was proper to worship icons. As a result the first split in Christianity occurred, with the West continuing to practice Catholicism and the Byzantines practicing Eastern Orthodox. Later divisions of Christianity would come about with the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 1500s.

Significance

The Byzantine Empire served two very important historical functions:

1. **Preservation of Roman and Greek Culture** - When the Roman Empire in the West collapsed in 476, many libraries and places of learning were destroyed in the chaos and much of the knowledge that had been gained under the Greek and Roman civilizations was lost. However the eastern half of the Roman Empire, the Byzantine, survived. As a result the Byzantine served to preserve much of the Greek and Roman advancements for Western Europe. Most significant was the preservation of Roman law by Emperor Justinian, the Byzantine's greatest emperor. Justinian codified and deciphered the Roman law codes and also expanded upon the existing codes. As a result, these law codes were preserved and have become the basis for the legal systems of many Western countries, like the US.
2. **Cultural Diffusion** - Not only did the Byzantine help preserve Roman and Greek culture and Christianity but the Empire also spread these ideas to other parts of the world. During the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries, Western Europeans making their way to the holy land had to first pass through the Byzantine Empire. As a result they brought many of those ancient Greek and Roman accomplishments back to Western Europe.

Two missionaries from the Byzantine Empire, named Cyril and Methodius, traveled into Central and Eastern Europe to spread the ideas of Christianity to the Slavic people. However, Cyril and Methodius could not teach the Slavs to read the Bible since they had no written language. As a result the two missionaries created an alphabet that eventually formed the basis for the Cyrillic alphabet, which many peoples in Central and Eastern Europe still use.

The Byzantine Empire finally collapsed in 1453 due to invasions by the Ottomans, but fortunately by that time it had served its important function as a bridge to the past and to the achievements of the Muslims.