

Part 3: The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire, or the Eastern Roman Empire, with its capital in Constantinople would survive until the Ottoman Turks conquered it in 1453. Modern historians commonly call the Eastern Roman Empire the Byzantine Empire after Byzantium, the original name for Constantinople. However, Byzantines always called themselves Romans, even though by the seventh century, they no longer spoke Latin, but Greek. Since there wasn't necessarily any insurmountable cultural difference between east and west in the fifth century, why did the Eastern Empire survive the fifth century? In 395, there were just as many reasons for the Eastern Empire to fall as there were for the Western Empire to survive. However, neither of those events occurred. Until about 460, Germanic generals often dominated the Byzantine military, threatening the stability of the eastern half of the empire. For example, during the reign of Theodosius II (r. 408-450) and Marcian (450-457), the Germanic general Aspar dominated the Roman military, and even selected Emperor Leo I (457-474) to succeed Marcian. However, Leo I distanced himself from Aspar and his Germanic troops, and instead began to rely on the Isaurians from Asia Minor whose leader, the future emperor Zeno, married Leo's daughter and produced a son also named Leo. In 471, Zeno began to spread a rumor that Aspar was plotting against the emperor. Since neither the Byzantine populace nor the emperor had great love for Aspar, they easily believed the rumor. So, the emperor invited Aspar and his son to the palace where he had them both murdered, freeing the empire from Germanic control.

Another reason that the Germanic warlords did not overwhelm the Eastern Empire was that the imperial administrative system worked. Ever since Diocletian's reforms, the military and civilian administration had been separated. Despite the relative uselessness of the first three emperors of the fifth century (Arcadius, Theodosius II, and Marcian), civilian administrators

managed to keep the civilian government out of Germanic hands as well as to provide strong leadership when the emperors were incapable of doing so. In addition to a working civilian administration, dynastic stability and good governance continued because of the women of the imperial family. These women both guaranteed continuity, even if just an illusion of continuity, through childbearing and/or marriage and often took on some, if not most, of the weight of governing. For example, under Theodosius II, both his wife Aelia Eudocia and his sister Pulcheria, a consecrated virgin, competed to dominate the emperor. Later, after her pathetic brother died, Pulcheria provided continuity within the empire by setting aside her virginity and marrying the Emperor Marcian. Thus, the Eastern Roman Empire weathered the storms of the fifth century, and by the death of Anastasius I in 518, the empire had a major surplus of revenue and no major political, social, or political problems.

When Anastasius I died without an heir, the imperial bodyguard did what the army always did, they proclaimed one of their own as emperor. In less stable times, such an uncertain succession probably would have led to a civil war, but the new emperor Justin I (r. 518-527) had no such problems, and when Justin died in 527, his successor and nephew, Justinian I (r. 527-566) likewise faced little opposition to the palace guard's proclamation of him as emperor. Though historians often call him 'the Great', 'or the Lawgiver', or 'the Conqueror', and the Orthodox Churches revere him as a saint, his contemporaries did not always see it that way. One of his greatest critics was also his official historian, Procopius of Caesarea (d. 554), who not only wrote some of the few surviving accounts of Justinian's wars and a panegyric of Justinian's building projects, he also wrote the pornographic and gossipy *Secret History*, which he never published and was lost to history until the early seventeenth century. In the book, he lambasted Justinian and his Empress-consort Theodora (d. 548). On the surface, it just seems that

Procopius was just interested in retelling salacious stories about Theodora, retelling how as a young teenager, her uncle forced her into a life of an actress for the Blues chariot racing team. An actress in Byzantium was not a celebrity, but a combination of a porn star and a prostitute. It was an experience that seems to have deeply scared Theodora, and after she married Justinian, a former fan, she established convents for repentant actresses. Procopius in this seems unfair, but his attacks on her are not merely examples of Byzantine misogyny and a fear of powerful women. Rather, Procopius and others resented that Justinian avoided drawing his administrators and advisors from the traditional senatorial class and even sometimes found reasons to seize the property belonging to the elite class.

Procopius also disliked Justinian's new laws that punished pedophiles with castration, perhaps influenced by Theodora's experience, and withdrew toleration of heretical groups, such as the Arians. These new laws, or *Novels*, were part of Justinian's great law code arranged and revised between 529 and 533. Justinian desired to include every valid law and eliminate all the obsolete ones, as well as to codify the commentaries on the law in the *Digest* and provide an official textbook for law students in the *Institutes*. Justinian not only instituted laws against heresy, he also attacked paganism by prohibiting pagans from teaching publically and closing the ancient schools of philosophy in Athens. Though the law code is considered one of the foundations of Western jurisprudence, Procopius considered Justinian a tyrant, and went so far as suggest that he was not completely human; rather, he was the spawn of a demon. Whether Procopius really believed this is unclear, but Procopius clearly disliked Justinian.

Indeed, in 532, Justinian faced one of his greatest challenges in the Nika Revolt that almost cost him his throne. In most Byzantine cities, eastern Romans had long been occupied with chariot racing, and across the empire there were four main chariot racing teams or factions:

the Blues, the Greens, the Reds, and the Whites. Though not necessarily interested in politics, the chariot factions often became involved with both political and religious controversies, and their uprisings could often turn into full-scale insurrections. This was the case of the Nika revolt in 532. It started when supporters of the Blues and Greens demanded pardon for two of their members who had survived an attempt to execute them for murder. Their rioting turned political when a mob of Blues and Greeks broke open the prison and began to burn much of the city center, shouting *Nika!* *Nika* means victory, and it was the shout of racing fans in the Hippodrome. Even senators began to encourage and participate in the revolt, and things escalated even further when the crowds seized Anastasius I's nephew, Hypatius, and proclaimed him emperor against his will. With this Justinian almost fled the city for the safety of another region of the empire, but Theodora shamed him into standing his ground, telling him, "purple [the royal color] makes a fine burial shroud." So, Justinian stayed and faced the possibility of death, but then his general Belisarius returned from wars with the Persians and put down the revolt, killing some 3,000 people. Justinian had the luckless Hypatius executed, and then exiled some senators and confiscated their property for supporting the revolt. Justinian then launched his rebuilding projects, including a new royal palace, cisterns for water, and most magnificent of all the Church of Hagia Sophia, or Holy Wisdom, which upon its completion was the largest church in Christendom until it was converted into a mosque in 1453.

Although Justinian is sometimes called the Conqueror, he is more aptly called Justinian the Delegator, since he rarely led an army onto the battlefield but instead relied on his generals, especially Belisarius (d. 565). During the reign of Justinian, his generals managed to retake North Africa from the Vandals between 533 and 534, Italy between 535 and 554, and some of southern Spain in 552. These conquests did not occur without difficulty, and the conquests

ultimately overextended the empire contributing to disasters in the late sixth and early seventh century. Though the initial re-conquest of North Africa was relatively easy and the Vandal treasury paid for Justinian's rebuilding projects, the Byzantine government there faced a few mutinies when it failed to pay the soldiers. Of all the reconquests of Justinian's reign, this one proved the longest lasting, since the Byzantines would hold onto it until the Muslims conquered it in the late seventh century. Italy proved more difficult to retake. Despite some initial successes, Ostrogothic resistance led to a twenty-year war that did much more damage to the fabric of Roman civilization in the peninsula than had the Ostrogoths. At one point in 547, after an Ostrogothic king was driven out of Rome, the Eternal City, the heart of Roman civilization, was left uninhabited for a few months. The Byzantines finally succeeded in subjecting the Ostrogoth when they brought in another Germanic tribe called the Lombards. However, just as the Ostrogoths did before them, the Lombards decided they wanted Italy for themselves.

One of Justinian's most serious concerns throughout his reign was the mighty Sassanid Persian Empire to the east. Though the Byzantines established a long-term peace with Persia in 532, that peace came to an end in 540 when the Persian king began to attack the eastern provinces, forcing the Byzantines temporarily to abandon Antioch, one of the largest cities in the empire. The war was brought to an end not by an overwhelming Byzantine victory but by an outbreak of plague that affected both the Byzantines and the Persians. This Justinian Plague of the early 540s, probably was the Bubonic Plague, which probably spread into Egypt from Ethiopia, and from Egypt it spread into the rest of the empire, including portions of the reconquered Western Empire. It is estimated that it killed off about 230,000 of the population of Constantinople, or half of it. In total, it probably killed off about 25 million of the empire's population. It greatly weakened the empire's fiscal health, since it killed off a large number of

soldiers and taxpayers. It also devastated the countryside just as much as or more than it did in the cities, so though there were less mouths to feed, there was no one to harvest the crops. The Justinian plague thus started a trend in late antique Byzantine history that saw cities begin to shrink and trade to thin out, as it previously had done in the west. Many of the gains of Justinian's reign were lost not just because of the long-term effects of the Justinian Plague, but also because Justinian's successors were less capable than he was.

While Justinian and his predecessors had done their best to avoid provoking the Sassanid Empire, Justinian's successor and nephew, Justin II, provoked the Persian Empire into going to war by foolishly attacked it. As a result, the two empires engaged in war off and on for the next sixty years, culminating in a disastrous war between 602 and 628 during which the Persians took over Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Though the Byzantines ultimately were victorious in this war, driving the Persians out of Byzantine territory and into their own civil war, the war had so weakened the Byzantine Empire, that it could not withstand the onslaught of a new enemy, the Muslim Arabs. Beginning in the 630s, the Arabs began to overrun much of the empire, and by 700 the Islamic Empire had conquered Egypt, North Africa, Syria, Palestine, Spain, and other regions, reducing the empire to Asia Minor, Greece, the Balkans, some major Mediterranean islands, such as Sicily, and parts of Italy. Despite this, the Byzantine Empire would continue to thrive. The invasions helped to refine Byzantine identity as an orthodox Christian Roman Empire that the Byzantines hoped would stand the test of time. Indeed, by 800, the empire was re-expanding and by the early eleventh century had made inroads into the Mesopotamian region itself, which by this time was near the heartland of the Islamic Empire. Nevertheless, medieval Islamic civilization, starting as an obscure religion in Arabia, continued both to pose a threat to

the Byzantine Empire and to adapt the Greco-Roman heritage to its own cultural needs. It is to this new civilization we will turn next.