

Quadrant V - Notes

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Byzantine Empire:

Before the Roman Empire vanished in 476 C.E it was divided in to two parts that is the Eastern and the Western Roman Empire. So when the Western Roman Empire fell to the continuous attacks of the tribes, there were whole lot chances for the Eastern Roman Empire to continue as it was run by representative of the Emperor and not by emperor himself. It was the continuation of the Roman Empire.

Byzantine Empire receives its name from the Greek city Byzantine which was later named by Constantine as Constantinople. Byzantine Empire is also known as Byzantium or Eastern Roman Empire. Constantinople became the capital of the Roman Empire when Constantine moved his capital here from Rome. This city was a combination of Roman and Greek cultures and so was the new empire. The Byzantine consisted of Balkans, Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine to Egypt. In short this empire consisted of the eastern frontiers of European and the eastern regions of the Mediterranean coast. Constantinople served as the connecting point between Europe and Asia on land. Constantinople also became the 'New Rome'.

There were various immediate and long term reasons for the development of the Byzantine Empire which are as follows:

1- The division of the Roman Empire:

The Roman Empire had grown huge in size by 285 C.E. It was practically difficult for the Roman Emperor to control all the parts of the empire which had spread around the Mediterranean, parts of Northern and Western Europe and Asia Minor by sitting in Rome. It was for this reason Emperor Diocletian decided to split the empire into Eastern and Western Empire. The Western side was governed by the emperor from Rome and the Eastern part was governed by a trustworthy person selected by the emperor. The two regions developed a system of being governed separately by two emperors.

2- Moving of the capital from Rome to Constantinople:

Emperor Constantine moved the capital from Rome to the city of Constantinople named after him. He also decided to reunite the empire and rule from Constantinople. The capital Constantinople was the largest and richest urban centre, a strategic location and a trade route. This decision is said to have accelerated the fall of Roman Empire as emperor concentrated all his powers and resources in the Eastern side giving time for the European tribes to raise their heads up again.

3- Constant attacks of the tribes:

As there was no competent successor to the Roman Empire after Constantine, the attacks of the various barbaric tribes became more common. They even defeated the mighty Roman forces brutally leading to killing of the Emperor. The attacks were so strong that they captured and looted Rome. Situation became so worse that the emperor of the West was driven from his throne in 476 C.E. This eventually led to the Roman autocracy and nobles fleeing to the Eastern side of the empire and setting it up as their new domain. This new domain continued as the Byzantine Empire for another 1000 years.

There were all together around 12 dynasties which ruled over Byzantine Empire. They were Justinian Dynasty [518-602], Heraclian Dynasty [610-695, 705-711], Isaurian Dynasty [717-802], Palaiologan Dynasty [1259-1453] etc. not all the rulers of all the dynasties were competent and strong. Many of them were puppets in the hands of strong aristocracy, some were usurpers and some were minors. The fact that there were competent contenders who made their way to the throne at various times was the reason for the Byzantine Empire to last for a long 1000 years.

Important rulers of the Byzantine Empire:

As the long history Byzantine suggests, there were important emperors and important events that had taken place. It is important to study these to know the Byzantine Empire in more detail.

1. Justinian I(527-565):

Justinian I is considered to be the greatest ruler of the Byzantine Empire. He was a visionary who wanted to restore the Roman Empire to its old glory by conquering the lost territories of the West. He conquered parts of Northern Africa, Italy, South Spain and Northern coast of the Mediterranean. These campaigns re-established Roman control over Western Mediterranean increasing its annual revenue. One of his important legacies was the uniform writing of the Roman law, which is still the base of civil law in many modern states. During his reign there was growth in architecture, administration and trade, making Byzantine a fully flourished empire.

2. Heraclius(610-641):

Heraclius was a usurper who came to the throne after a reign of terror. He defended the empire from Persian attack. It was during his rule that neighbouring Persian Empire vanished due to Arab invasions and the new Muslim empire came in to existence. He had to defend the Byzantium Empire from the Arabs as it was becoming Mediterranean power.

3. Leo III(717-741):

He belonged to the Isaurian dynasty. He came on the throne after 20 years of Anarchy as there were rapid successions and instability. He defended the empire from the Umayyad Caliphate. His reign is famous for Iconoclasm. There was opposition to use of religious images and icons from the Greek Church. It is also called as the first Iconoclasm. Leo III banned all religious images and icons and it was also continued under his successors. This ban was accompanied by destruction of images and persecution of the supporters of image worship.

4. Alexius I Comnenus(1081-1118):

He belonged to the Comnenus dynasty and it was during his reign that this dynasty became powerful. By this time there was rise of the Turks and they had captured many of Byzantine territories in Asia Minor. He aimed to re-capture it. To achieve this goal he asked for military help from Pope Urban II. The West instead of band mercenaries sent a huge army of volunteers whose goal was to capture back Jerusalem from the Turks. This is called as the first Crusade.

5. Constantine XI(1449-1453):

He was the last emperor of Byzantine. He belonged to the Palaiologos Dynasty. He died fighting the Ottoman Turks, which led to the fall of

Constantinople and end of the Byzantine Empire. This ended the 1000 years long rule of the Byzantine Empire.

Achievements of the Byzantine:

Byzantine Empire has preserved the cultural traditions and learning and literature of the Greece and the political techniques of the old Roman Empire. Roman law and Greek philosophy and letters were studied at Constantinople. Manuscripts of Greek literatures were copied in great manner, Medical works, legal treatises and technological ideas were compiled during this time.

In the field of art and architecture the artists of Eastern Empire produced enduring master pieces. Many majestic churches were built by the rulers – St. Sophia at Constantinople, St. Vitale in Ravenna and St. Marks in Venice. The extensive use of ornaments, symbolism, the vault and the dome was at Oriental inspiration.

Trade and industries flourished in Byzantine Empire. They traded in spices, drugs, perfumes, precious stones, and valuable woods. Cities like Constantinople, Antioch, Damascus, Beirut, Salonika and Corinth prospered.

There were numerous textile mills in Constantinople. With the import of silk worm from China, silk became major article of commerce.

Jewellery, religious ornaments, metal ware, ivory carvings and weapons were produced and sold in quantity. Agricultural output was sufficient to provide adequate food supply as a result the Byzantine Empire enjoyed great wealth, with yearly revenue, during prosperous times. Many painters were patronised by the byzantine rulers.

In the field of administration the empire did a lot. Bureaucracy was set up by the rulers of Byzantine which was later on followed in many European countries.

Religion

Greek Church was established while Christianity arose in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Iconoclastic controversy – Leo banned icons/image worship, idea of purgatory was rejected.

Society:

Byzantine society was essentially urban, similar to early Hellenistic type.

Metropolis constituted an industrialized community. Nobility, wealthy officials, large land holders lived in elegant surroundings in the atmosphere of laxity; yet many of them were cultivated and talented individuals. Middle class, merchants and manufacturers lived well but more conservatively. The lot of the peasant was not to be envied and, towards the end of Byzantine rule many were reduced to serfdom.

Reasons for the decline of the Byzantine Empire:

There were various short term and long term reasons for the decline of the Byzantine Empire.

1. Attack of the ottoman Turks:

Attack of the Ottoman Turk was the immediate reason for the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. The last Byzantium emperor Constantine XI was killed in the battle with the Turks and this led to fall of the capital Constantinople. This ended the mighty Byzantine rule and also blocked the only land route that connected Europe to Asia. Constantinople was then known as Istanbul.

2. Nature of the Emperors:

Not all the Byzantine emperors were as great as Justinian I. every now and then there were usurpers who capture the throne. It was not necessary that their rule would last long or they would prove to be good monarchs due to these circumstances there was a slow decay of the Byzantine Empire. Although at various times there were competent and strong monarchs who set on the throne which is also considered as the major reason for the Byzantine Empire to last for 1000 years.

3. Continuous wars and growth of new monarchies:

Since the beginning Byzantine Empire had to face external threats from the neighbouring enemies. They were all the time busy in wars with initially the Persians, then the Arabs, the different Caliphates and in the end the Turks. The threat was not only from the East but with development of major kingdoms in the West; they too came in conflict with the Byzantine Empire.

4. Battle of Menzikert:

This battle fought in 1071 between Byzantine and Seljuk Empire. The byzantine forces were clearly defeated and Emperor was captured. This led to the entry of Turks in Asia Minor. This defeat led to civil and economic crisis and Byzantine was never actually able to recover from the losses.

5. Crusades:

Crusade also served to be one of the reasons for the reasons for the downfall of the Byzantine Empire. The first crusade was meant to help Emperor Alexius to fight and recapture the lost land in Asia Minor specially Jerusalem. But soon the religious motives of Crusades seemed to have got diverted and during the fourth crusade, the crusaders instead of going to the holy land; captured Constantinople in 1204 and continued to loot, mass massacre and stay there. This was a major blow and it took very long for Byzantine to recover from this.