

# BYZANTIUM – Economic History

*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

## Contents

Part I : Economic Innovations

Part II : Trade

Part I : ECONOMIC INNOVATIONS

**Overview** Byzantium, a vast empire like the Roman, understandably built on the basic of its earlier exemplar. In its millennium long history Byzantium prospered from the innovative city building, and amenity-creating, skills of the Romans, while here and there innovating in a manner suitable to the life and security styles of a new Empire exceeding in comfort and sophistication any seen to that date. We look, below, at a few of the major Byzantine innovations.

## Architecture

**Cross in square construction** Devotedly Christian, in their fashion, Byzantine architects managed--starting in the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.--to create an architectural form uniquely expressing the intention behind it. The central area of the church was cruciform, inscribed in a square, and topped with a round dome. The effect is compact: the space of worship is tightly bounded; the long axled nave of the Gothic is a thing of the past. Worship is concentrated, and the altar up close to the liturgical action.

**The pendentive dome** This architectural innovation, dramatic in Justinian's Hagia Sophia Cathedral, is a brilliant solution to the problem of blending the vast, light-capturing dome, into the sub-domes and arches that carry the energy of the airy ceiling down to the distant floor below.

## Warfare

**Greek fire** Greek fire is our name for the Byzantine version of a projectile fire-spreading device used in naval warfare to assail the prow of an enemy warship. This was not a new device--the Assyrians used it as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.--but the Byzantines, from the later seventh century C.E. on, used it to uniquely powerful effect, mastering the deadly art of keeping a wall of fire aggressively burning on the surface of the water.

**Ballistic devices** Byzantine military engineers were highly skilled at constructing deadly ballistic devices. In addition to Greek fire they excelled in the creation of flamethrowers, incendiary grenades, and stone-throwing catapults.

## Arts and Amenities

**Icons** The art of the adorational icon, created in stone, mosaic, cloth, wood, is not uniquely but is most eloquently developed in Byzantine culture, where not only the artistic but the technical demands of this miniature religious form manifest extreme skill and patience.

**Toilets** These vessels of evacuation, which for the Greco-Roman world (and infinitely before that) were basically chamber pots to be dumped from the window, became among the Byzantines comfortable seating arrangements from which, for the lucky and well off, excreta could be washed down into drainage systems.

## Reading

Demus, O., *Byzantine Mosaic: Decorative Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*, London, 1947.

Mango, Cyril, *Byzantine Architecture*, New York, 1976.

### **Discussion questions**

There were many water sources in the cities of the Byzantine Empire. How was this water supply harnessed? Were there fountains, wells? Were there sewers?

Naval warfare was often decisive for the Byzantines. What kinds of threats from the sea were they anticipating? How did they fare, in warding off attacks?

What military explanations are to be given, for the crumbling of the Byzantine Empire before the Ottoman Turks? What kind of role did naval fighting play in that defeat?

### **Part II : TRADE**

**Overview** From the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., Byzantium became synonymous with luxury, much of it generated by international trade; it is estimated that, from the later 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. until the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantium was the seat of the world's most prosperous economy. As those dates indicate, however, the Byzantine economy, and trade, were subject to numerous ups and downs; for example to the Arab-Islamic attacks of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, C.E., which were a dreadful blow to Byzantine commerce, and, at the other end of the prosperity centuries, to the economic meltdown of Byzantium in the last two centuries before it fell to the Ottoman Turks (1453 C.E.)

**Travel routes and trading partners** We consider a thousand years, in reviewing the trading history of Byzantium. In the broadest sense, the map is the arbiter of the commercial history of this period, for it placed Byzantium, like Istanbul after it, at a pivotal trading point from which to reach inland to the Black Sea and beyond, southward into the Mediterranean, and then far beyond, eastward in the Mediterranean, southward into the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the waters of East Asia. By land, eastward, Byzantium was increasingly part of the variously available overland routes called The Silk Road.

**What was traded** Dependent on the time period, the markets of Byzantium particularly favored trade in silk and grain. The former was essential for supplying the luxury needs of the upscale market in Byzantium, although the widespread use of silk was not confined to upscale gowns and lingerie for the fine ladies of Alexandria and Antioch, but was employed for such uses as mummy wrapping or reliquary lining. Grain was an essential commodity for the regulation of consumer markets throughout the empire. In addition to these commodities, there was huge traffic between Byzantium and its trading partners--particularly those North Italian trading cities--Venice and Genoa and Amalfi--which not only traded but bankrolled many a Byzantine trading venture. Other Byzantine commodities widely trafficked, on an international level, included oil, wine, fish, meat, vegetables, and, yes, even slaves.

### **Reading**

Nicolle, David, *Constantinople 1453: The End of Byzantium*, Oxford, 2000.

Haldon, John, *Byzantium: A History*, Gloucestershire, 2002.

### **Discussion questions**

What kind of taxation and supply control did the Byzantine government exercise, over the products shipped in and out of their ports? The government-imposed tax, on both imports and exports, was typically 10%. Were there efforts to evade taxation, by smuggling?

Our stress above was on international trade. How were local and regional trading arrangements established? Was there general oversight over regional trade? How were prices set? Were local markets part of uncontrolled private enterprise?

The Islamic interventions of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. marked a sharp set back to the Byzantine economy. How did this setback affect the guy on the streets in Byzantium? Was there unemployment? Rampant poverty?