

BYZANTINE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview Like the class structure of many early western societies, Byzantine class society was built around a top heavy power structure. The Emperor of the Byzantine Empire enjoyed great power, as the Ruler of a Christian Empire, who was thus both a spiritual and a secular controller. Under him--though on a few occasions the Emperor was an Empress--deployed a rich pyramid of subordinate 'classes,' from aristocrats down to peasants and slaves, all members of one polity. While the Empire lasted a millennium, we will here content ourselves with brief generalized biopsies of each of the major social strata that made up the Empire.

The classes The Emperor stood alone on top. Under him, rarely her, stood first of all what we might call the strongest power-holders: aristocrats of old lineage, frequently relatives of the Emperor; large landholders, who were constantly on the lookout to increase their territory; retired military of the highest ranks; numerous higher bureaucrats, functionaries of the higher Departments of State. Below these wealthier strata of Byzantine society--the occupants of, it seems, five. thousand or more sumptuous mansions, scattered throughout the capital--came the quarters of the largely commercial group of artisans, merchants, craftsmen, and market employees, the little people who kept the movement of commerce active. Below this 'lower class,' which by the way was upwardly mobile, and on many occasions proved to be permeable, ranged the truly poor, the peasants, and the slaves, none of whom--this was nominally a 'Christian Empire,' was allowed to fall below the concerns of charity and grace. On the outside of this congeries of competing groups arrayed those (sometimes numerous) monks and nuns who prayed for the whole.

What made this class-conscious society work?

Imperial might At the top of this society--as at the 'top' of British society today--stands the Emperor. This deeply revered figure, though in close 'touch with God,' like a Mesopotamian ruler millennia earlier, was in fact a figure closely in touch with the secular running of the Empire--making laws, establishing treaties, demonstrating his usefulness to the people. This superman held the keys to a top heavy but vital social structure.

A city fascinating to and for all Constantinople was the most sophisticated city of its time, greatly urbane and (superficially, from the outside) there to be enjoyed by every class of citizen. A walk around the city would provide ample purviews of great mansions, royal palaces--of which there were four gigantic examples--deer parks to eyeball, as well as a Hippodrome--twin to the Roman Coliseum--in which the little people of the street could watch circuses, public games, juggling contests, and feats of acrobatics. For guys thirsting for a simple brew and never closer than distant spectators to the Emperor's Malmsey-gushing imperial fountains, there were café's, taverns, and bars aplenty, with tables set up for lively parties of chess, and for high living little guys, with stomachs hungry enough to eat a stallion. Here was a city in which people could 'forget to complain.'

Another thought about 'what made it work' The Byzantine Empire survived on the same firm structures--of political governance, law, and military strength--which had carried the West through to its fall. Two unique features, though, were working on behalf of the Byzantines. Christianity, meaning 'monotheistic religion' in this case, gave the Empire a firm consolidating credo to work from. Point one. The second unique feature of Byzantium is this. Byzantium was more strongly placed, even than imperial Rome, for trading in all directions, and was able to enrich itself, from its geopolitical position onto the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Red Sea, more lastingly and potently than was its sister in Italy.

Reading

Babinger, Franz, *Mehmet the Conqueror and his Time*, Princeton, 1992.

Fletcher, Richard, *The Cross and the Crescent*, London, 2005.

Discussion questions

How does the class structure of ancient Rome compare with that of the Byzantine Empire? What are the essential differences, both in the early Western and in the later, Byzantine period?

How much secular power did the Orthodox Church, the Church that thrived under the supervision of the Patriarch, exercise in the secular affairs of the Byzantine state? How powerful were the clergy?

How badly was the Byzantine Empire harassed by 'barbarian tribes,' as it developed over a millennium? How was it finally possible for the Ottomans to 'bring the Empire down'?