

BYZANTINE HISTORY

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Political History

GOVERNMENT

Overview The Byzantine government was grafted on to a version of the western Roman Imperial government, at the time when Constantine first moved the Empire to Constantinople, but from that point on, following the sinuous curve of Byzantine history, the Byzantine government adopted an increasingly unique form of almost Oriental protocol, in which ceremony and diplomacy occupied important roles. The following will be notes on some of the traits of the distinctive government that Byzantium adapted, on the old Roman base.

Early centuries: 4th to 7th C.E. At the beginning the administration of Byzantium made gestures toward adapting the formal government style of the early Roman Empire. Times however had changed, and from the start Byzantium had no way to replicate the republican institutions of an earlier age--and different place. The Byzantine government preserved a fiction of a senate, without legislative or executive power, but ascribed all power to the Emperor who--as was almost never the case in the Roman Empire--was taken to be an expression of divinity. The origins of a courtly bureaucracy, which was to be the later trademark of Byzantium, can be seen in the array of courtly eminences who begin to gather around the Emperor, each playing out roles in the closet drama of a self-involved empire.

After the Islamic intervention The Islamic incursions of the early 7th century convulsed the Byzantine Empire and decimated its treasury, but continuity was guaranteed, in Constantinople, by the durability of the civil service--the courtly office holders around the Emperor were a significant part of this retinue, as were the old office-holding aristocrats-, who were themselves both the lucky by birth, and the new land holding aristocrats.

The theme system By the seventh century C.E. the Byzantine government had, despite the constant pressure of assaults from outside, begun to master the art of controlling its own vast territories. A major step in this direction, already mentioned in our entries on Byzantine military matters, was the organization of the Empire into themes, or military government controlled divisions. These organizational units, each under the control of its own military/civilian governor, were not only to replace the former civilian administrative units, but were to form the nuclei of governmental outreach until the last days of the Empire.

Meanwhile back at court It would be hard to overstate the complexity and refinement of the court officialdom, which was meanwhile--as the theme system was developing and the 'barbarian'

was constantly at the gates--developing into a network of checks and balances, and diplomatic manoeuvrings, by the hierarchies of functionaries who made up the court life of Constantinople itself. It would also be a mistake, we are coming to learn, to underestimate the underlying functionality of this hierarchical system, a ballet of protocols of which one purpose was to promote and receive complex diplomatic missions, mediating between the Emperor and the 'outside world'--there was a Bureau of Barbarian Affairs in the center of the capital, and there were spies at every foreign court--and, in the end, just 'keeping the machinery of government moving from one Emperor to the next.

Reading

Haldon, John, *Byzantium in the 7th century: The Transformation of a Culture*, Cambridge, 1997.

Treadgold, Warren, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford, 1997.

Discussion questions

The Emperor was viewed as 'related to divinity.' What was the role of the Church, and its higher authorities, in running the government of Byzantium?

Did the complex stratification of court personnel, in Byzantium, serve a useful purpose? What would it be, or have been?

What role did Justinian's law code, instituted in the sixth century C.E., play in the organization and direction of the Byzantine government?

MILITARY

Overview As we meet it, in history, the Byzantine army is already simply a brother to and child of the imperial Roman army of the West. Though Byzantium was already a Greek city state at the time of ancient Athens, it was not until Constantine moved the Empire eastward to Constantinople, in 323 C.E., that the military history that meets us in these excerpts comes into flowering. What then flowers, in Byzantium, is a powerful army and navy based in every respect--organization, weaponry, strategic command--on the basic forms of the western Roman military. Those basic forms, though seriously altered, will persist in the Byzantine military forces through the millennium that follows Constantine's move.

An historical glimpse

The early stage One can imagine that the military history of a vast Empire, over a millennium, is in a constant state of change. The Byzantine Empire was continually under military pressure from without, as was the western Roman Empire, especially in its last centuries. During the early centuries of 'Byzantium,' through the reign of Justinian (482-565 C.E.), one might generalize that the Byzantines fought like Roman soldiers, in all the familiar accoutrements, arranged by infantry legions, and supported by cavalry.

The advent of Islam and foreign incursions The advent of Muslim military forces, in the seventh century and after, meant that a new kind of military administration was required. It was not just a question of military strength, or powerful attack techniques, like the Greek fire mentioned in the entry under 'Byzantine innovations,' but a question of using effectively the resources of the fast growing population of the Byzantine Empire. The major military-administrative move here, top down from the Emperor, was to institute a system of *themes*, military districts, in which there would

be win-win recruitment of free peasants, who serve as career military, while in the end receiving land in payment.

After the Islamic interventions The government's finances were ruined by the Muslim interventions, but land they had to offer until, at the end of the Empire, the feudal system began to eat away at the land available for recruitment. In the final centuries of the Empire, even after the (to the Byzantines) disastrous defeat at Manzikert (1071 C.E.) and the Crusaders' plundering of their capital (1204 C.E.), the Byzantine army was still able to stage major land grabs in the Balkans, Syria, Armenia, and even Italy. The careful use of mercenaries--who were clamoring for money and war on the borders of the Empire--was for a long time an aid to growth, though first the Seljuk, then the Ottoman Turks were to prove far too much for the shrinking Byzantine army, which folded in 1453.

Reading

Dennis, George T., *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Military Strategy*, Philadelphia, 1984.

Martussis, Mark, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society 1204-1453*, Philadelphia, 1997.

Discussion questions

Did the geo-political location of Byzantium make it vulnerable to eventual destruction? Or were the seeds of invulnerability latent in its social and economic inequalities?

How did Byzantine weaponry and fighting style change after contact with Arabic and Muslim fighting styles? Did the two opponents learn military technique from one another?

What was the *theme-system*, which the Byzantines used so effectively to recruit among the free peasantry, after the Muslim interventions? How did a late burst of Feudalism help to undermine the *theme system*?

Social History (Social Structure – Gender)

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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, and 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 throve 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'?

GENDER RELATIONS

Overview Male dominance proving to be the default condition in human society, by and large, one notes with interest those ancient bows toward female brilliance, occasionally to be found tucked in the archives of the oldest histories: one reads of women physicians in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamian priestesses whose scientific knowledge--to mention only that--put them at the peak of their culture, or of a Sappho, whose sizzling and elegant lines still haunt us. The examples are of course legion, and continually growing--as, for instance, we learn by the day about the critical roles women played in ancient business life. Precisely this kind of 'awe of the female' shakes us, as we read of the (as too often) unexpected richness of women's positions in the Byzantine Empire.

The middle class woman's early life From what we can deduce, the life of 'ordinary women' changed relatively little over the millennium long course of the Byzantine Empire. (Constant military incursions, frequent food shortages, internecine strife: all these factors will have guaranteed sufficient insecurity, as always, in the lives of mothers and daughters, as we need hardly say.) Our lady of the house is likely to have been raised according to the respected maxim of Kekavminos, in his *Strategikos*: 'keep your daughters as prisoners, confined and inconspicuous.' Prior to marriage, at 12 or 13, young women never went out unaccompanied, never ate their meals in the presence of men, rarely went to school--although with luck they were tutored at home, at least to the level of reading and writing and memorizing the Psalms of David, plus, as the last suggests, mastering (and accepting) the fundamentals of Orthodox Christian belief. It goes without saying that absolute chastity was required, of any girl aspiring to a decent marriage.

The middle class woman's married life. Except for those cases in which the young woman followed her heart into a convent, she usually followed her parents' decision, in taking her mate. (There were well-known occasions when an abduction--resulting from an ardent couple's conspiracy--would trigger parental agreement to a bride's innermost passions.) From that point on the woman was subject to two authorities, that of the Church, in which she will have been indoctrinated since baptism, and that of her husband. Within the former relation she will have been born and will die, while within the latter she is likely--if she is lucky, and as custom enjoined--to be relatively content, exchanging child bearing and child care for a marital relation in which a variety of freedoms were guaranteed, freedom to go to the baths, on pilgrimage, to visit with her lady friends, to walk around the city, as well as the important freedoms to manage her own business, arrange and sign contracts, retain her own dowry, and inherit fully from a predeceased husband.

The example that breaks the mold. The Empress Theodora (500-548 C.E.), wife and colleague of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (482-565 C.E.), exceeds all Byzantine women in power, and not only in power but in determination to use some of her power to support the lives of women in the Empire. (The fact that her husband was the greatest law giver since Hammurabi helped her in this.) This humbly born daughter of a bear trainer is known to us (for good and bad both) by the historian Procopius, who has described both her extravagant gifts and her extravagant vices--in two different books. In 525, after a public life that included both stage acting and prostitution--each interpretable in two different ways--this married Lady of Imperial Power did a great deal to introduce legal measures of assistance to women. Women's rights, under Theodora, were legalized and enforced: measures to illegalize brothels, to support women who were being victimized in marriage; to free the daughters of female slaves; to help actresses to transition from their 'dubious profession' into the dignity of Christian marriage.

Reading

Garland, Lynda, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, A.D. 527-1204*, London, 1999.

Evans, James A.S., *The Empress Theodora, Partner of Justinian*, Austin, 2002.

Discussion questions

What was the condition of life for women in the West, the old Roman Empire, during the Byzantine period? Had mediaeval 'western women' the advantage of any such advocate as Theodora?

What would a contemporary Feminist say to the 'protection of women's rights' fought for by Theodora? What major 'women's rights' were not covered in Byzantine society?

How was the Byzantine woman indoctrinated into her Orthodox Christian belief? Did she go to mass? Did she receive religious instruction in the home? From whom?

Economic History (Innovations – Trade)

INNOVATIONS

Overview Byzantium, a vast empire like the Roman, understandably built on the basis 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 8th 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 9th 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?

TRADE

Overview From the 10th to the 12th centuries C.E., Byzantium became synonymous with luxury, much of it generated by international trade; it is estimated that, from the later 8th century B.C.E. until the early 13th 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 7th and 8th 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 an 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 7th and 8th 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?

Cultural History (Science – Art – religion – Philosophy – Literature)

SCIENCE

Overview In one sense the chief contribution of Byzantine culture to human development was its transmission of Greco-Roman culture to the Renaissance, and beyond. The scientific heritage of Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Pliny made its way through the mediaeval Byzantine period via the compendia and encyclopedias of which mediaeval scholarship was fond, and into the curiosity and forward thinking of Italian Renaissance Humanists. There were, however, significant achievements within Byzantine science itself--in ballistic science, in mathematics, and in medicine.

Mediaeval cultural transmission Mediaeval Byzantine scholarship was strong on compendia and encyclopedias. The exemplar par excellence is the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (560-636 C.E.), the activist polymath Archbishop of Seville. We might today consider his huge encyclopedia a grab bag of the scientific curiosities available at his time, some of which were in fact precious didascalica upon work of Aristotle and Plato, and yet his pages are full of material eagerly consumed, in his time, by privileged readers for whom antiquity was a basket of wonders. The same contribution was provided, in subsequent Byzantine centuries, by updated encyclopedias like the seven volume compendium of Paul of Aegina, whose particular interest is medical lore. The 13th century compendium of pharmaceuticals, compiled by Nicholas Myrepsis, was the principal pharmaceutical codex for the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, until 1651.

Achievements in Science

Greek Fire Greek Fire was a napalm like substance, whose essential ingredients were kept secret by the Byzantine State, but which served as a powerful naval weapon. The combustible brew of sulphur, bitumen, and petroleum, when lighted, maintained its fury when projected onto the water against the prow of an enemy vessel. The fiery assault would continue, unaffected by the water on which it was burning. On several occasions the Byzantines attributed their salvation to this experiment in destructive ballistics.

Mathematics Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles, mathematicians and architects of great genius, were chosen by the Emperor Justinian to draw the plans and supervise the work for

his ambitious Cathedral of Hagia Sophia, Sacred Wisdom. The challenge was great, due to the vast size of the structure; the central dome, 182 ft. tall, rested on a cradle of forty arched windows; twenty four buttresses were added to the sides of the building. Higher geometry was demanded at every stage in the planning of the structure.

Medicine Byzantine medicine developed early, and largely in the context of the hospital. The first Byzantine Hospital appears to have been built between 344-358 C.E., and to have heralded a spread of such institutions across the Empire--East and West--to the point where 160 hospitals, chiefly in Constantinople, were active during Byzantine times. Many of these hospitals were appendages to Churches, and played their part in the movement of early Christianity to feed and care for the ill and homeless. It should be added that the medical procedures, which took place in these hospitals, included subtle research into such maladies as gout and urinary tract issues, as well as highly developed surgical techniques for procedures like hernia operations.

Reading

Miller, Timothy, *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, Baltimore, 1997.

Mainstone, Rowland, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure, and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church*, New York, 1997.

Discussion questions

What was the role of the Academy of Athens, which was still flourishing in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., in preserving Greek scientific thought for the Byzantine East?

What role did Arabic culture and scholarship play in the transmission of Greco Roman science to Byzantium? Where were the relevant students of Arabic located, and what role did they play as translators?

In the 13th and 14th centuries C.E. there was extraordinary scientific activity in Byzantium, say in the work of scholar-scientists like Thomas Magister and Maximus Planudes. What was the nature of these men's scientific work; in particular what were their achievements in astronomy?

ART

Overview Byzantine art was not motivated by desire for innovation or change, and though there was abundant conflict within Byzantine intellectual circles--cf. the two major Iconoclastic Movements of the 8th and 9th centuries--the working traditions of Byzantine art were static from its inception until the 14th century. However within that traditionalism lay a respect for careful and profound work, which was unsurpassed in its vein, and which played its role in making Byzantium the wealthiest and most sophisticated world city of its time.

Architecture

San Vitale From 540-750 C.E., Ravenna, in north eastern Italy, was the capital of the Ravenna Exarchate of the Byzantine Empire, and the site of much imperial patronage and major artistic undertakings. The church of San Vitale in Ravenna, dating from 546 C.E., shares with much early Christian architecture (the Romanesque, in the West) a polygonal structure with four auxiliary domes, surrounding a central dome which, because there is no longitudinally axial nave, becomes the center of light and spirituality for the entire church. Effects of unusual subtlety are scattered throughout the church, as in the surfaces of the capitals and impost blocks, covered with what seems a fine lacy surface, a visual conflict with the heavy solidity of the construction in the dome.

Hagia Sophia This master cathedral, the supreme self-assertion of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora, brought together the architectural genius of two of Byzantium's finest artists--thinkers--and geometricians, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus. They worked, as did the makers of San Vitale, around the centrality of the dome, which was the primary light source for the huge temple; they worked with particular genius on the construction of the triangular pendentives, which descend from the central dome and gradually displace its weight onto the subsidiary domes, which carried the energy of the pendentives all the way to the floor of the cathedral.

St. Mark's in Venice Saint Mark's Cathedral was begun in 1063, on a main piazza in the Venice of high commerce and high art, one of the richest allies of Byzantium itself. The building is in the form of a Greek cross--arms of equal lengths--with each of the five domes--one central, four over the arms--covered with wood and gilded copper, a brilliant formula to the observer from below.

Mosaic

San Vitale On either side of the altar at San Vitale extend splendid mosaics of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora. A famed mosaic, of Theodora and her attendants, displays the queen with nine attendants, all created from subtly dyed mosaics--some in brilliant gold tesserae--aligned with their trademark Byzantine faces, huge eyes and tiny mouths, a long thin nose. What rivets our eyes is not exactly bodies depicted, but stylized spirits.

St. Mark's In the so-called Creation dome, above the narthex of the Cathedral, we follow concentric mosaic circles depicting the Creation Story from the Book of *Genesis*. One panel concentrates on the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. The pictorial formulae are stylized--no pretense of realism--and vivid, so that a worshipper without ability to read--the case of most--would instantly recognize the material depicted.

Painting

Madonna and Child Elongated forms, lengthy draped clothing, stylized faces--the long noses, wide eyes, small mouths mentioned above--these are trademarks of Byzantine painting, most of it thematically inspired from Christian sources, much of the best of it depicting the glorious sorrows of The Lady Mother of the Church. A splendid example, of this regal sadness, is the Madonna and Child Enthroned from 1270 C.E. Sadness, delicacy, loss and glory are compacted into one object of contemplation.

Reading

Beckwith, John, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, Harmondsworth, 1973.

Cormack, Robin, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford, 2000.

Discussion questions

Taking a wide view, what connections do you see between ancient Greco-Roman visual art, and that of Byzantium?

What kind of presence does Christianity exert on Byzantine art? Does it appear in particular themes or visual procedures?

What are Byzantine icons? Did the finest Byzantine artists turn their attention toward that form? Were the themes of some of those icons 'secular'?

RELIGION

Overview In 330 C.E. the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Byzantium, a thriving Greek colony out of range of the disastrous break downs impending in the Latin West, was to be chosen as the seat of Eastern Christianity, a position it retained until the Fall of the Byzantine Empire--the secular power in which Byzantine Christianity was embedded--to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

Getting started Like the Christian Church in the Latin West, the Byzantine Church needed first to come to an agreement about beliefs. On the official level this agreement was achieved through Councils, at which the leading figures in the Church convened to hammer out doctrine. There were seven such councils in the Byzantine East, dating from 325 C.E. (The Council of Nicaea, in Asia Minor) to 787 C.E., by which time it was felt that Byzantine theology had consolidated, for the time being. (The fact is that Byzantine theology continues to evolve, having been enriched in several dimensions within the past century.)

The character of the Byzantine Orthodox religion The fundamental tenets of the Orthodox Church are close to those of the Roman Catholic Church. For the Orthodox believer God the creator is presumed to have acted prior to time to create a world in which human beings occupy a central value-giving position. Jesus Christ is recognized as the God-sent Savior of Mankind, who through his death on the cross vicariously reprieved mankind from its sins. The supreme act of Reconciliation, between God and man, is the communion mass, in which the worshipper obeys Jesus' command to eat his body (wafer) and drink his blood (wine) 'in remembrance of Me.'

The points of conflict between Byzantine and Western Christianity.

Governance From the 'Western Christian' view point the chief conflictual element concerns the primacy of the Roman Papacy. The legal mind which has always dominated in the Roman Church, descended as it is from the organized legal structures of the Roman Empire, has never been happy with the pluralistic, multi structural format of the Byzantine Church--which is in fact the Eastern Churches, for in fact there are many widely separate Churches gathered under the Eastern Orthodox heading--Greek, Russian, Polish, Syrian, etc. To the papacy in Rome centrality and unique governance, over all the Roman Catholic domain, has been and remains essential, while to the Byzantine Church this insistence on primacy has been of less importance.

A basic issue It will illustrate the (so it may seem to us) fussily theological character, of the issues separating Byzantine Orthodox from Roman Christianity, if we mention the long-boiling conflict over the *filioque clause*. That Latin formula--first allowed to harden in the Nicaean Creed, where early Christianity set down its essential doctrines--refers to an addition which the Byzantine Church wanted to make to the Latin formula which declares that the Holy Spirit is born of the Father (excluding the Son, the Christ), which addition states that the Holy Spirit is also born of the Son, The Christ, *filioque (and from the Son.)* The gist of this consequence laden dispute--internal struggles of every sort were at stake--was that the Eastern Church wanted to affirm the full and equal personhood/presence of each of the three members of the trinity, while the Latin Church was (often) less insistent on the equality between Father and Son, and frequently privileged the importance of the Holy Spirit, the bearer of intelligibility, within the Trinity.

Reading

Binns, John, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Church*, Cambridge, 2014.

Fitzgerald, Thomas, *The Orthodox Church*, Westport, 2014.

Discussion questions

We mentioned one basic issue, between Byzantine Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity. That issue overlays a wider rift between the two branches of Christianity. For the Eastern Church mystical apprehension of God is widely admired, while for The Western Catholic Church much more stress (as in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas) is placed on rational analysis and logical conclusions. Review the Byzantine text, *The Philokalia*, composed of devotional materials written between the 4th and 14th centuries, C.E., to see how the Byzantine Church oversees the direct experience of God.

Constantine, who set up the Christian Empire in Byzantium, was of course a Roman and a Latin speaker. How did Greek become the working language of the Byzantine Orthodox Church?

The development of Byzantine Orthodox Christianity is studded with heresies. One of the most powerful was Arianism, which involved a highly contentious view of the nature of Jesus Christ. What was that heresy and how was it resolved?

PHILOSOPHY

Overview Eastern European philosophy, in the postclassical period, is here understood as the philosophy elaborated in Byzantium, presently Istanbul, between 330 C.E. and 1453 C.E., when the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks. The Byzantine Empire, established as it was on the foundations both of Christianity, to which the Roman Empire Constantine had converted, and of Greco-Roman culture, which was inherited from the Roman Empire, generated a unique philosophy, preserved til this day within the framework of the Greek Orthodox Church, and among our chief living bonds, today, to the philosophies of the early Christian and pre-Christian worlds.

The tenor of Byzantine philosophy Higher education, under the Byzantine Empire, was largely devoted to preparing educated employees of the vast bureaucracy of the Byzantine Empire. Thus there was a ready job market for the students of the educational system, which was widespread and highly developed. From the villages and townships of the Empire to the mundane and sophisticated halls of the University of Constantinople, which was founded by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 425 C.E., prospective functionaries from all over the Empire--Antioch and Alexandria rivalled Constantinople itself for cultural development--prepared for careers in the labyrinthine halls of bureaucracy. The cultural homogeneity suggested by this state of affairs was assured by the common use of Greek throughout the Empire, a lingua franca of thought and communication.

The challenge facing Byzantine philosophy Aristotle and Plato may be said to have dominated the philosophical thinking of Byzantine philosophy, as they dominated the high period of Scholastic thinking in the West, the thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure. The most influential thinkers of the Greek East--Photios (810-after 893 C.E.), Michael Psellos (1018-after 1081 C.E.), Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 C.E.), Gemisthos Plethon (1360-1452 C.E.)-all studied Greco-Roman philosophy, in Greek, and made the thinking of Aristotle and Plato the axis of their positions. The assignment facing them was to harmonize their positions, on the relative values of the thought of Plato and Aristotle, with the fundamental principles of what became distinctively to be known as Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the dominant religion of the Byzantine Empire. The complexities of this assignment, orienting oneself both within the religious parameters of Orthodoxy and within the intricate interrelations between Plato and Aristotle, led to responses of great subtlety, which have made Byzantine philosophy, especially in light of its longevity, difficult to access from the outside.

Typical issues dealt with in Byzantine philosophy: the soul Central issues of Byzantine philosophy are the questions of the immortality of the soul and the nature of universals. Mediaeval philosophy, east and west, dwelt on the thorny Aristotelian issue of the nature of the soul. By some interpretations Aristotle believed that the soul and the body were indissolubly one, and that therefore when the body dies the soul is gone for good. Others disputed that this was Aristotle's meaning, insisting that for him the soul was a deathless principle of intelligibility that pervades the individual, and that the soul cannot perish. Both of these positions necessarily took into account the position of Plato--in the *Phaedrus*, for example--that the soul is the immortal dignity of the human person.

Typical issues dealt with in Byzantine philosophy: universals Like their fellow Scholastic philosophers in the West, Byzantine philosophers took up Aristotle's logic, and his preoccupation with whether and how universals exist. One example might be the universal, beauty. Many individuals have the property of being beautiful. Beauty therefore can be called a universal, a property applying to many individuals at the same time. But what kind of a thing is beauty itself? Is it 'real'? Has it independent existence? Arid though a non-philosopher might consider this issue, when it is attached to issues like the nature of love, or justice, or faith--which are embedded in Christian theology--the existential importance of the philosophical issue is immediately apparent.

Readings

Wilson, N., *Scholars of Byzantium*, London, 1983.

Ierodiakonou, K., ed., *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, Oxford, 2002.

Discussion questions

How did Greek become the lingua franca of the culture of Byzantium? What were the origins of the city of Byzantium?

What were the chief stages of the development of philosophy in Byzantium? You will need to do some research on this question, which will deepen your understanding of the wide variety of positions available within a seemingly monolithic tradition.

Gemisthos Plethon was the Byzantine philosopher with (arguably) the greatest influence on thought in the west. What did he think, and what was his influence?

LITERATURE

Overview Byzantine post classical literature in Greek is an archaizing body of work, largely written in versions of ancient Greek, the Greek of 5th century Attica, and often concerned with versions of or takes on ancient Greek literature. While we call this literature Byzantine, and properly so because its inspirational center remained Byzantium, ninety percent of Byzantine literary production took place outside the imperial capital, in the dominating cultural centers of the Empire, in Antioch and Alexandria, and as far away as Palestine and Syria. The unifying trait of this huge body of texts, created until the fall of Byzantium, was that it was written in Greek, that was largely imitative, and that its themes included generous representations of Christian, Greek, and Roman cultures.

The range of literary types As we know from Byzantine philosophy and theology, the thought-world of the Byzantine Empire--with its many imperial schools, religious infighting, theological distinction-making, and highly sophisticated aesthetic perspectives--was hermetic and refined. The sixth century C.E. historian Procopius, chronicler of the times and even amours of the Emperor

Justinian, is considered the last of the great tradition of ancient historians. Working from the classical inspiration of such as Lucian the satirist (125-180 C.E.), generations of satirists thrived on the news of the Rialto, as it played out in the socially cool, and often debauched, milieu of the capital, Constantinople. Refined poetries--didactic, panegyric, romantic, epigrammatic-- sharpened wits and stirred emulation throughout the Empire. In the last five centuries of Byzantium popular poetry flourished on the fringes of the Empire, and was at its best reminiscent of the epic of classical times or of the profound religious perspectives inherent to Byzantine mysticism.

Three brief excerpts from Byzantine literature may leave a taste in the mouth.

Romanos, the Melodist Romanos (490-556 C.E.) was one of a number of legendary hymn composers, whose powerful poetry and strong sense of poetic rhythm earned him a perennial place in the Orthodox liturgy. He is said to have composed a thousand hymns, after an unpropitious early life as a Jewish kid from Syria, who was widely thought to be a slow learner and a poor prospect for the priesthood. His gifts were revealed to him one night in dream, by the Virgin Mary; she appeared to him holding a scroll, the proof that he was destined to be a great poet and cantor. And the rest was history.

*Why thus faint-
hearted? Why
veil ye your
faces? Lift up
your hearts!
Christ is arisen!
Join in the
dances, And
with us proclaim
it: The Lord is
ascended,
Gleaming and
gloried, He who
was born
Of the giver of light.
Cease then your
mourning, Rejoice in
blessedness:
Springtime has
come.
So bloom now, ye
lilies, Bloom and be
fruitful! Naught
bringeth destruction.
Clap we our hands
And shout: Risen is
He Who helpeth the
fallen ones To rise
again.*

Digenes Akritas The Byzantine folk epic by this name, *Digenes Akritas*, rises from the fund of highly popular story material under creation in Greek Byzantium from the 7th to the 12th centuries B.C.E. The narrative concerns an Arab convert to Christianity, who becomes an outstanding fighter for the Christian faith, living and overcoming all manner of enemies on the wild distant

eastern margins of the Byzantine Empire. The following excerpt is from a manuscript dating from the 12th century C.E.

*They mounted at once and they came to the
battlefield. They hissed like dragons, they roared
like lions,
they soared like eagles, and the two clashed.
And then you could see a fight between fine brave
youths. In the heat of the battle they struck
continuously,
and from the great clashing and the cut and
thrust the plains grew fearful and the
mountains re-echoed, trees were uprooted
and the sun was darkened. Blood flowed
down over their horse-trappings
and their sweat ran out over their breastplates.*

Michael Psellos Psellos (1017-1078) was an outstanding Byzantine monk and academic, a chronicler, a theorist of history writing, and an unparalleled observer of the society of his times.

He is a perfect example of the fruit of sophisticated Byzantine culture; a trace of his narrative skill persists in the translation below, from his *Chronographia*, a record of the political infighting (and more) of the age.

As for the common mob, it was already on the move, greatly stirred at the prospect of exercising tyranny over him who had himself played the tyrant. And the women -- but how can I explain this to people who do not know them? I myself saw some of them, whom nobody till then had seen outside the women's quarters, appearing in public and shouting and beating their breasts and lamenting terribly at the empress's misfortune, but the rest were borne along like Maenads, and they formed no small band to

oppose the offender. 'Where can she be?' they cried. 'She who alone is noble of heart and alone is beautiful. Where can she be, she who alone of all women is free, the mistress of all the imperial family, the rightful heir to the Empire, whose father was emperor, whose grandfather was monarch before him --yes, and great-grandfather too? How was it this low-born fellow dared to raise a hand against a woman of such lineage? How could he conceive so vile a thought against her? No other soul on earth would dream of it.' Thus they spoke and hurried together as though they intended to fire the palace. As there was no longer anything to stop them, for all men had already rebelled against the tyrant, they took up their positions ready for battle, at first in small groups, as if they were divided by companies. Later, with all the citizen army, they marched in one body to the attack.

Reading

Benton, R., *The Mediaeval Greek Romance*, Cambridge, 1989.

Jeffrys, Elizabeth, *Digenis Akritis*, Cambridge, 1998.

Kazhdan, A.P., *A history of Byzantine Literature, 650-850*, Athens, 1999.

Discussion questions

In what ways, or at what points, does Byzantine literature seem to you to take its inspiration from the classics of Greco Roman Literature? How familiar were educated Byzantines with Greco Roman literature?

What was the state of literacy in the Byzantine Empire? Where would people go to find texts to read? What was the role of the monasteries in educating 'the people'?

What was the condition of Universities in Byzantium? Was there a surge in university foundings in 12th and 13th centuries C.E. Byzantium, as there was at that time in the West?