**The Byzantine Empire**

***Constantine “The Great”*** transferred capital of Roman Empire from Rome to his new city, “Constantinople”, AD 330… (AD 410 Rome sacked by Alaric the Goth): shifted centre of Roman power eastwards paving way for its continuation in a new form post final fall of Rome, AD 476.

[“Constantinople” built on site of Ancient Greek “Byzantium”, hence the Eastern Roman Empire’s new name – “The Byzantine Empire”.]

Arguably, height of Byzantine power = reign of ***Justinian I*** (527-565AD) whose generals, Narses & Belisarius, extended the empire to incl’d Asia Minor, the Balkans, Palestine, Egypt, N Africa, S Spain, & part of Italy.

Byzantines saw themselves as heirs to Rome, its law, government, traditions, and popular culture (eg bath house culture; chariot racing etc).

*“Codex Justianus”*: a monumental work of legal scholarship codifying centuries of Roman jurisprudence – contained “Corpus Juris Civilis” (Body of Civil Law), and “Institutes” (textbooks), plus “Pandects” (summaries of key classical legal theories, cases, opinions), all of which supported a written Constitution (“The Novellae”). This dictated every aspect of Byzantine Government/ public life.

By C9th Byzantine Government was highly sophisticated, complex, and “professional”. Economic life, day to day admin, and a professional military were integrated and organised by territorial “Themes”. Each “Theme” supplied a military levy of money & personnel for regiments and naval flotillas. In Constantinople itself there was an elite Imperial Guard (“Tagmata”), and an Imperial Fleet. By C11th, however, the Byzantine army was increasingly reliant on foreign mercenaries (eg Varangians), and altho’ still a formidable force (esp its famed heavy cavalry), the reliability and steadiness of many units was increasingly questionable, as demo’d at Manzikert,1071.

The Central Administration was organised into councils (“Logotheses”), and there was a governing central council (“Logothetis”) headed by a chief minister (“Dromos”). At a local level, society was “feudal”, dominated by powerful aristocrats, leading theme members, and religious leaders (usually heads of monasteries). People of the “middling sort” (“stratiots”) paid tax (lots!), whilst peasants and unskilled workers were serfs in all but name. Trade and craft guilds dominated/ regulated nearly all urban economic activity, often with stultifying effect.

The Eastern Orthodox Church was a state church: Constantine had been its head, and this contd under his successors. The Patriarch (spiritual leader), bishops, & clergy were all under the authority of the Emperor who had the final word in all matters of doctrine. There were frequent persecutions of “heretics”. Justinian’s great “Hagia Sophia” was the ultimate architectural expression of this triumphant Orthodox Christian power and majesty: “Solomon, I have outdone thee!” – Justinian

{NB “Hagia Sophia” converted to a mosque by Turks post 1453; now a museum in modern Istanbul}

Byzantine Christianity was distinct, and increasingly divergent from the Western Roman model, esp from C7th when Greek replaced Latin as the official language of the Empire:

* Graeco-Roman fusion with Eastern aesthetics, mysticism – evident in art (eg distinct painting style, mosaic art etc), literature, philosophy, architecture (esp churches)
* Classical scholarship strong (eg Plato v popular), but increasingly Platonic thinking overlain by mystical spirituality…hermits, visionaries etc.
* Devotional worship focused on “icons”; elaborate ritual derived from “Eastern” trads rather than the “Roman style”.

A distinction emerged between “Secular” clergy (who lived in the world at parish level, and could marry), and the “religious” clergy who lived “out” of the world; the ideal being hermits and monks who practised extreme piety/ devotion via asceticism, self-sacrifice, mysticism etc. Although, a similar division existed initially in the W Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church was decidedly more “mystical” in ethos, and the use of “Icons” as a devotional focus for ordinary worshippers became a huge source of tension: “The Iconoclastic Dispute” (late C8th/ early C9th) – Pope Gregory III + many other Eastern Christians (eg Egyptian Copts); Jews, and Muslims, *all* objected to icons – a rare unity of opinion! Consequently, AD 867 Patriarch Photius (with Imperial support) formally separated Orthodox Church from Rome (“Photian Schism”).

In contrast, the Western Roman Church was becoming increasingly a state in its own right: there were eventually Papal States in Italy with armies, diplomats, coinage, law, and real political clout, led by the popes who were their secular, as well as religious, rulers. The Bishops of Rome (“Popes”) claimed primacy (as direct spiritual heirs of St Peter) over “Christendom”, and were building a centralised structure (echoing the Roman Empire) under which “all roads led to Rome”. To a large extent, the insistence on Catholic priestly celibacy (adopting/ imposing monastic “regulation” on all in holy orders) was a result of papal determination to protect and maintain the assets of the Western Catholic Church, and thus bolster Roman power/ authority. Rigid “top-down” control by the Vatican.

Broadly, in the West, the Roman Catholic Church became the validating “power” giving legitimacy to Medieval “kingship”, as well as exercising sovereign kingship in its own right. In the East, the Orthodox Church served the Byzantine state whilst exploring and promulgating distinctly “eastern” spiritualities and forms of worship.

For some time, the Byzantine Empire seemed to be sustaining the reality of Ancient Roman Imperial power, but this was illusory… only a temporary respite… in the face of continual pressure. After Justinian’s reign it shrank inexorably/ gradually until eventually only Greece and the Balkans remained relatively secure. Empire under constant attacks: Persians from the East (Persians themselves facing pressure from Asiatic “horse people” from Eastern steppes – Mongols etc); Slavs agitating in the Balkans to North; from South came the surging Arab power! Finally, but not least, came the Seljuk Turks, who by C11th were taking over swathes of the Arab Empire.

Eventually, Byzant Emp overthrown by Turks (1453): key date in history of “The West”…traditionally historians have viewed fall of Constantinople as a “marker” of end of Middle Ages/ Medieval. Somewhat simplistic, but it is true that Turkish pressure on Byzantium C12th onwardscaused a steady westward stream of Byzantine scholars, artists, and treasure…mainly via Italy, which had significant effects re the emerging “Renaissance”.

Earlier divisions came to a head in 1054 – “The Great Schism” – final breach b/ween E & W churches…issues incl’d papal authority, theology, & “culture” – ie growing mutual incomprehension re piety/ religious “style”.

This “schism” = important factor in generation of the “crusading” movement… when Byzantium requested help from the western Christians, the Pope saw an opportunity to heal rifts/ reconcile/ reunite – all, of course, under his authority!

This, of course, was very much NOT the Byzantine agenda…but the Empire had many troubles, and needed Western troops to fight the Turks/ Muslim powers.

1095 – Byzantine Empire under Comnenus dynasty in big trouble:

1. Court intrigue rampant/ internal polit divisions…
2. Tensions b/ween capital bureaucrats & provincial military nobility…
3. Economic stagnation, and concomitant social discord…
4. Reluctance of ordinary people to serve in military – increasing reliance on mercenary forces…
5. Huge threats on all sides – Arabs, Mongols, Turks…
6. Emperor Comnenus appealed to W Christians for military support V Muslims and other “heathen infidels”, but did not want anything other than this from the barbarous “Franks”!

The importance of the Byzantine Empire was as a bulwark of “Christian civilisation” – for centuries it “held the line” V Persians, Arabs, Turks enabling W Europe to develop distinct national identities and cultures. The great cultural achievements of Byzantium were:

1. Conversion to Christianity of the Slavs, esp Russians.
2. Byzantine Greek theology, mysticism, monasticism had a huge infl on W Europe/ the evolution of the “western mind”…
3. Byzantium preserved/ transmitted vast amounts of the intellectual/ cultural heritage of antiquity to Arabs, Turks, and W Europeans: incredibly important legacy to the World/ Humankind. (CRH, April 2016)