A NICKEL TOUR OF BYZANTIUM

By COLIN WELLS

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Introduction

Begininnings and Endings

The unpurged images of day recede;
The emperor's drunken soldiers are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night-walker's song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

William Butler Yeats, *Byzantium* (stanza I)

Once upon a time—a very different time—there was a knowledgeable creature called Every Schoolboy. The list of things that Every Schoolboy knew was a long one, but this particular item stood right at the top: the Roman empire fell in the fifth century, when its borders were overrun by hordes of Germanic barbarians from the north. Every Schoolboy could even have given you a date, the year 476 AD, for the "fall of Rome." In that year the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed, and Odoacer, a barbarian king, took his place. And that, as Every Schoolboy could have told you, was that. Every Schoolboy would certainly have scoffed at the idea that the Roman empire lasted into the lifetimes of Columbus and Leonardo.

Every Schoolboy was wrong.
Rome didn't fall. It moved.

It moved in the year 330 AD, to a small dusty Greek trading town call Byzantium, and there it lasted for over a thousand years more. It lasted and lasted, though it rarely enjoyed even a generation of peace; lasted, though constantly facing what to us must remain turmoil beyond imagining; lasted, though continually beset by jealous invaders, eager to usurp its prosperity and claim its cultured splendor for their own, enemies who came and went like shark's teeth, with ever newer and sharper replacements springing into place even as the proud defenders wore them out. More than anything, its story is one of endurance, of often heroic resilience in the face of endlessly inventive adversity, a seemingly infinite regression fo cliffhanger comebacks followed by new and more ominous threats, followed by another impossible recovery and yet another peril...until, inevitably, time brought the end of the now subtly diminishing comebacks

and the New Rome, stripped piecemeal of its once vast territory, did indeed, like the Old Rome a millennium earlier, at last succumb.

By then, however—the mind perversely growing brighter even as the body failed—its civilization had surged beyond mere borders, sculpting the newer civilizations that were growing up around it: shaping the cultures that we occupy, our world.

The New Rome was conceived in 312 AD, with what has been called the most influential single decision in history: the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to the previously suppressed religion of Christianity. The conversion of an emperor changed everything, particularly an emperor of Constantine's energy and stature. It boosted Christianity immediately to a favored position. Within a century, it would become the official state religion, and the old paganism would be outlawed.

Thus conceived, the New Rome was born eighteen years later, when Constantine set up a brand new imperial capital at a Greek city named Byzantium—or as it was henceforth also to be known in Greek, Nea Rome Constantinoupolis, or New Rome, the City of Constantine. In English, this is rendered Constantinople.

So Constantine, even as he adopted a new religion, also picked Rome up and dropped it squarely in Greek territory. Byzantium, the larger entity not the city, grew out of these two simple choices.

The effects of such profound innovations took several generations to kick in. By that time, Italy had been largely lost to the barbarians, leaving Rome without Rome.

Imagine the following scenario. The United States takes over Mexico and then moves its own capital to Mexico City—after which savage Canadians swarm south over the border, sacking Washington and settling the eastern seaboard. Meanwhile in Mexico City, a new largely Mexican elite emerges, molding American political institutions to Mexican ways, and in the end conducting the nation's business in Spanish. On top of that, imagine the American president who moved the capital also declaring that he was a devout Scientologist and would henceforth give Scientologists special privileges in society. Imagine further (if you dare) that Scientology has been around for several centuries, and is already winning significant segments of the population, and that the Mexicanized America now embracing it also happens to contain in its own (Mexican) past the most splendid and potent culture in world history.

This picture, outlandish and grotesque as it will strike most readers, nonetheless illustrates what happened to Rome—and to Christianity. It was an endlessly fascinating situation, combining elements of continuity, transformation, and renewal, and it all stemmed from Constantine's two revolutionary changes. Revolutionary, yes, but also somehow conservative. They both reflect a series of incremental changes that add up to a wholly new thing, like repairing your car by replacing parts one by one until all the parts are new—yet it's still in a real sense the same car. And from a certain angle, in many ways the two actions blur into one. Two trails through the woods converged on a single threshold, two slow processes tripped with deceptive suddenness into one critical mass: new religion, new capital, new lease on life for a tottering *imperium*.

Several centuries earlier, following the expansion of raw Roman *imperium* into the cultured Hellenistic world, the Latin poet Horace had written: “Greece, captive Greece, her conqueror subdued / And Rome grew polished, who till then was rude.” Rome, in other words, arrived in the Greek East as a jumped-up conqueror whose culture was at first hopelessly outclassed and then tutored by the deeper and richer civilization she met there. Romans were strategically dominant but culturally abashed. Call it the Yanks-and-Brits syndrome. They were abashed, at times defensively contemptuous even, but also enthralled. This edgy infatuation went back all the way to Rome’s earliest days, for even before winning her first imperial wars Rome had grown up in Greece’s cultural shadow. Horace was describing only the latest installment in a long process. But Horace’s lines would prove prophetic as well as descriptive, prophetic in a more literal way, because by Constantine’s time the imbalance had come to include strategic elements as well as cultural ones. By the early fourth century, as barbarians pressed on the northern borders, all the empire’s strengths lay in the East, with its broader agricultural base, its ancient, prosperous cities, its denser population, its rooted and stable traditions. Constantine was basically a stalwart and rather wooden man, but in acknowledging this sea change with an eastern capital he showed acute perceptiveness. And in his choice of the actual site, he showed true genius.

According to tradition, the trading port of Byzantium had been founded by the mainland Greek city of Megara in the seventh century BC, during Greece’s age of colonization. Its location, on a jutting peninsula overlooking the Bosporus, was so superb that the founders of Chalcedon, on the opposite shore, were accused of blindness for passing it up. Forming the peninsula’s northern edge is the Golden Horn, one of the world’s great natural harbors, a deep inlet cutting into the Bosporus’ European shore. The southern edge looks out onto the Sea of Marmora. Across the narrow Bosporus, through which the fast currents run between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmora, lies Asia Minor. Thus the city not only lay at the boundary between two continents, but also commanded the crucial trade route between the Mediterranean and the grain-rich Black Sea ports. Even better, it was almost unassailable, for an enemy had to invest it by both land and sea in order to create an effective blockade. Its citizens could withdraw behind their massive land walls, and its fleet could be protected by a great iron chain pulled across the mouth of the Golden Horn. Its record as a fortification is unmatched, and without its advantages Byzantium would certainly have perished before it really got going. As it turned out, the Byzantines would weather invasion after invasion by tucking themselves into their great tortoise-shell of a city.

Constantine began work on his New Rome in 324 AD, the year that he won sole control of the empire, and officially dedicated it six years later, in 330. The city remained in Christian hands for over eleven hundred years, until high technology in the form of Turkish heavy cannon finally beat the great walls in 1453. Keep these latter two dates in mind, for they mark Byzantium’s life span. Its culture had roots in earlier times and spread into later ones, and transitional periods came at both ends, but for our immediate purposes we can say that Byzantium lasted from 330 to 1453 AD.

But hardly anything, of course, is ever really that simple. Historians debate endlessly over where properly to place such beginnings and endings. Similar contests rage over what names to use, for there are just so many of them. Both names and dates, of course, are pointless by themselves. They are merely handles, of little use unless they’re attached to something firm. Still,

you need to grasp the handles to lift the bag, so remember the years 330 and 1453.

And the names. Oh, the names. Nothing is so potentially confusing to the budding Byzantinist than the names, be they of individuals, groups, institutions, ideas, or things. There are two immediate problems. First, the language, Greek, looks scary and complicated to the English eye, though I promise that these initial impressions soon give way to enchantment and even mirth. There were, for example, eleven emperors named Constantine—an average of one per century—so it helps that one (Constantine VII) is called *Porphyrogenitus*, which translates as "born in the purple," i.e. the royal bedchamber during his father's tenure as emperor: a way of proclaiming that he was not a bastard when everyone knew he was. It helps, at least, to distinguish this Constantine from some of the others, such as Constantine V Copronymus, "the shit-named," whose epithet supposedly arose from an unexpected incident during his baptism. All good fun, but fact both emperors were significant and worthy, so these little mnemonic devices serve a definite purpose—both for those who bestowed them as well as for outsiders like us. Still, it takes a while to tell, say, your *protovestiarios* (keeper of the wardrobe, a palace official) from your *parakoimomenos* ("chamberlain," his superior), so a little persistence is required.

The second problem is that everything you meet seems to have at least a couple of different names (even in English) and often more. Take the name Byzantium itself. Originally, as we've seen, it designated the small, pre-"Byzantine" city that existed before Constantine refounded it as his new capital. Its legendary and eponymous founder was a Megaran Greek named Byzas. Even after it became officially Nea Rome Constantinoupolis and its inhabitants Constantinopolitans, they still frequently referred to it as Byzantium and to themselves as Byzantines. Equally often they and others just called it "the city," much like New Yorkers today. Its Turkish name, Istanbul, comes from the Greek *eis ten polin* (to the city), which is how Greeks headed there answered Turks who asked where they were going.

Only in modern times did the terms Byzantium and Byzantine come to be used not just for the city itself and its immediate residents, but more generally for the empire, its citizens, and the civilization of which Constantinople was the center. It was, suitably enough, the grandpappy of all Byzantinists, Charles du Fresne du Cange who canonized the broader usage in the seventeenth century. Du Cange, incidentally, a child of the French Enlightenment, was a charming polymath who pioneered the use of knowledge from other fields (such as geography, numismatics, and archeology) in his historical studies. His dictionaries of medieval Greek and Latin are groundbreaking works of historical linguistics on which scholars today still frequently rely.

If the Byzantines didn't call themselves Byzantines, what did they call themselves? They had a couple of choices. First and foremost, they were *hoi Rhomaioi*, which is Greek for "the Romans" (the irony seems to have escaped them). The empire, therefore, was *basileia ton Rhomaion*, the empire of the Romans, or later simply *Romania*. The Byzantine claim to the name Roman was legitimate, at least in a political sense, for the Byzantine emperors could trace their line of succession back to Augustus, the first Roman emperor, who ruled in the lifetime of Christ. But the Byzantines would also call themselves simply *hoi Christianoi*, "the Christians," with a presumption of religious universality that corresponded to similar presumptions in the

political realm. I've given the Greek versions of these terms because, in using Greek to identify themselves as Romans and Christians, the Byzantines reflected what historians call Byzantium's "tripartite" structure: Greek culture, the Roman legal and political framework, and the Christian faith.

Its equally significant that the Byzantines did not as a rule call themselves Hellenes, which was how the ancient Greeks had referred to themselves. For most of the empire's existence, the term Hellene was associated with pagan Greek culture. This meant that while the pagan classics were definitely something to study in school (approved, in a limited way, by St. Basil of Caesaria in a famous letter to his nephews, "On the Value of Studying Hellenic Literature") they were not something with which to identify oneself with too closely. Or delve into for the wrong reasons, as we shall see. Yet during the empire's closing centuries, the intellectuals who studied the pagan classics would revive the name "Hellenes" in their learned treatises, the better to link themselves with the glory of ancient Greek literature. By then, a new sense of Greek patriotism was beginning to emerge, partly in reaction to the aggression of the newly powerful Western Europeans, whose rulers had for some centuries when they wished to offer a deadly insult to the Byzantine emperor addressed him as "emperor of the Greeks" (*Graeci* in Latin) rather than "emperor of the Romans." But this rising Greekness was a late development, and for much of its history Byzantine society was remarkably free of dividing lines based on race or ethnicity, drawing its lines instead according to faith.

On the "one-name-is-never-enough" principle, modern historians often refer to Byzantium as East Rome or the Eastern Roman empire, or even the Later Roman empire. Usually, however, they won't push this designation further than about the sixth or seventh century, bowing to the standard interpretation, which holds that the first few centuries after Constantine make up a transitional period.

Which takes to the next topic, the basic outlines of Byzantine history. Using our broadest brush, we can divide the canvas of Byzantine history into four sections of around, say, two to four centuries each. We can also fill in the background to each section with a different group of dangerously looming enemies, whose conflicts and interactions with the Byzantines help give each section its own look and feel.

In the transitional first era, which extends from Constantine's reign (312-37) to that of Heraclius (610-41), Byzantium's main enemy to the east was Persia, long the traditional foe of Greeks and Romans. To the west, it was the Germanic tribes, similarly familiar from past conflicts going back to the day of Augustus and before. The reigns of the era's three great emperors—Constantine, Justinian, and Heraclius—mark the period like the three movements of a symphony. Or think of Constantine and Heraclius as the two ends of a balance, with Justinian (ruled 518-65) as a fulcrum between them. More on these three in the next chapter.

By the beginning of the second period, from Heraclius to the accession of Basil I in 867, Persia was out of the picture and whole new set of enemies had appeared. In the east, the Muslim Arabs completed their conquest of Byzantine Syria, Palestine, and Egypt before the death of Heraclius. They also swallowed Persia whole, to use Peter Brown's memorable image.

In the west, the Slavs undertook a huge migration south from their homeland (in modern Poland and Ukraine) into the Balkans and Greece beginning in the sixth century. Pressed on either side by these two aggressive and formidable new opponents, Byzantium was on the ropes for a good two centuries. In the hundred years from roughly 570 to 670 AD, the empire lost vast pieces of its territory. Spain and most of Italy, briefly reclaimed by Justinian, fell for good to the incoming Germanic tribes, though the Byzantines retained possession of parts of southern Italy for centuries more. Much of the Balkans and Greece were taken over by Slavic immigrants, who established a warlike Bulgarian state uncomfortably close to Constantinople itself on lands conquered from Byzantium. The Middle East and North Africa (another part of the empire reconquered by Justinian) fell to the Arabs. In Western Europe, Byzantine prestige was challenged by the powerful Franks, whose rulers mounted counterclaims against Byzantium for the title "emperor of the Romans."

Yet Byzantium survived these potentially catastrophic losses, emerging from its trial by fire in a new form, its true Byzantine incarnation, if you will. No longer the sprawling empire of antiquity, the New Rome instead took its place as the compact superpower of the Middle Ages. The reign of Basil I the Macedonian (867-86) inaugurated the period of recovery, which lasted about fifty years past its high-water mark, the reign of his great-grandson, Basil II (976-1025). During this "Macedonian Renaissance" great strides were made against the new enemies, earning Basil II the nickname *Bulgaroctonos*, the Bulgar-slayer. The empire's territory almost doubled in size. Bulgaria was conquered and absorbed, borderlands were regained in the Middle East, footholds in Italy were expanded, and the empire in general enjoyed an economic and cultural flowering. To this period belongs the empire's most impressive cultural achievement, the apprenticeship of the Slavs. Those who had pierced deep into the heart of Greece were absorbed into the Greek population with hardly a trace, while many of those further away were brought, through conversion, firmly into what a leading modern scholar has called "the Byzantine Commonwealth."

Having outlasted the imperial aspirations of the Franks, Bulgarians, and Arabs, Byzantium faced a final set of enemies in the form of the resurgent Western Europeans and the Muslim Turks (who had replaced the Arabs as the leaders of the Islamic world). The Westerners came as merchants who sapped the empire's economy, Crusaders who undermined its morale and prestige, and Norman warriors (often the same as the Crusaders) who constantly harried its outlands. The invading Turks defeated the Byzantine army at Manzikert in eastern Asia Minor in 1071. This is a big date to remember—though the battle itself was not a crippling defeat, the aftermath was disastrous for Byzantium, since it allowed the populous Turks to move into Asia Minor. (We now think of this as "Turkey," but up till then it was the Byzantine heartland.) Both enemies, too, captured Constantinople, the Westerners horribly sacking the city in the Fourth Crusade of 1204. Though the Byzantines recovered their capital in 1261, they now had no more than a fraction of their former strength. When the Turks finally took the city in 1453, they took a city only, for virtually all the empire had been theirs for almost a century already, and the Byzantine emperors their vassals for much of that time. Yet this period of military defeat and political disintegration saw long stretches of great leadership (such as the three heroic and ingenious emperors of the Comnenan dynasty, during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries) and

inspiring cultural achievement (such as the startling intellectual and artistic renaissance under the Paleologan dynasty of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, when Byzantine scholars helped give rise to the more famous Renaissance in the West).

So, to put it in the simplest terms possible, we have four periods: Transition (312-641), Dark Age (641-867), Recovery (867-1071), and Defeat (1071-1453). Each one has a distinctive feel, determined in large part by Byzantium's interactions with its neighbors, who were usually the same as its enemies. Yet they were enemies for a specific reason: they wanted what Byzantium had, be it territory or the holy and prestigious throne of emperors. This gave the Byzantines something of an edge, and it made them indeed the true heir of Rome, for to its neighbors the earlier empire too had been above all an object of awe and envy.

But Byzantium existed in a more threatening and turbulent world than had the Roman empire proper. Byzantium, in fact, is how the empire dealt with that changed world. Between these changes, the empire's borders at times shrank and then reexpanded with a rapidity that resembles nothing so much as a venerable star in its death throes, collapsing catastrophically on itself and then, impelled by the reaction to the very force of the collapse, hurtling its outer shell back out into space virtually instantaneously. Over and over, Byzantine power was contained within Constantinople's mighty walls. During the combined Avar-Persian siege of 626, for example, the city's inhabitants could see the Persian watch-fires across the Bosporus. And yet only a few years later, Heraclius broke Persian power forever and reconquered the lost Middle East—only to lose it again to the Arabs just after that. How many times can that be kept up? The rexpansions grow less substantial; in the end, gravity overcomes heat, the internal fuel has been used up, and only the tiny dense nucleus is left, itself finally flickering into a blackness from which no light can flee.

Byzantium has its own wave pattern of decay and renewal, each trough or crest of which often lasted as long as the entire lifetimes of its neighbors and enemies. In my book *Sailing from Byzantium*, I tell the story of Byzantium's interactions with the younger cultures around it, exploring the profound cultural impact that Byzantium made on Western, Islamic, and Slavic civilization. Here I'm offering this "Nickel Tour" as a way of looking at the same picture from the inside. We can use the four periods outlined above as our handles, taking them one-by-one to get an idea of the often startling changes that transformed Byzantine society, as well as the profound continuities that comprised its extraordinary bond with the past.