

Transition:

The Birth of the Byzantine World, 324-641

One God was proclaimed to all mankind. At the same time one universal power, the Roman Empire, arose and flourished....At the selfsame period...by the express appointment of the same God, two roots of blessing, the Roman Empire and the doctrine of Christian piety, sprang up together for the benefit of men....Two mighty powers starting from the same point, the Roman Empire which henceforth was swayed by a single sovereign, and the Christian religion, subdued and reconciled all the contending elements.

—Eusebius of Caesaria, the first historian of the Church (fourth century), in a panegyric of Constantine.

Constantine called Byzantium Constantinople after his own name; and as if it were his native city, he adorned it with great magnificence and wished to make it equal to Rome. Then he sought out new citizens for it from every quarter, and lavished such wealth on the city that he all but exhausted the imperial fortunes.

—Anonymous Valesianus, an unknown writer of the fourth century, describes the foundation of Constantinople.

Because the Mediterranean Sea is too small to experience actual tides, somewhere along the line the gods decided to make up for the lack by substituting extra-strong cultural ones. Or so it seems, at least, to the student of antiquity.

Since before the second millennium BC, great surges of culture had washed along the whole length of the Mediterranean coastline. Prevailing currents were from the east—Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek, to name a few of the major ones—and they were often influenced by the massive presence of the ancient Near East. For thousands of years, this Mediterranean world was relatively stable, though of course what was going on within it was highly complex. Beginning around the time of Constantinople's foundation, however, two things helped to disrupt the ancient pattern of contained cultural ebb and flow: the arrival of new people, and the rise of monotheism. Together, these two novelties slowly broke up the old homogeneous Mediterranean world into three armed and mutually hostile camps: Western Europe, Byzantium, and the Arab empire.

The Roman presence was the big exception to the general westward flow, and Rome's genius was less cultural than political and military. Rome had what the Greeks had always so painfully lacked: good government. The celebrated *pax Romana* was the final crystallization of the ancient Mediterranean world before its tectonic breakup. Extending

at its height from Lisbon to the Euphrates, from York to Egypt, and from the Danube to the edge of the Sahara, the Roman empire represents not only the gathering of the Mediterranean world under one political power, but also the greatest territorial extent of that world, the highest tidal water mark.

But the center of gravity had always been in the east, and that makes Roman power something of an aberration. From this perspective, the shift of power to Byzantium can be seen as a return to an old pattern rather than a revolutionary novelty.

Instead, as I've just indicated, the novelty lay elsewhere. From all points of the compass, the arrival of new peoples and outlooks signalled a clean break with the past. In Western Europe, this happened with the influx of Germanic "barbarians"; in the Near East and Africa, with the rise of the Arabs and Islamic civilization; in the north, with the migration of Slavs into imperial lands in the Balkans.

In the center, however, things were different. Here changes were incremental; the old outlook persisted longer. There was no clean break with the past in the Byzantine world, and for that reason Byzantium links us with antiquity. It's true that this "traditional" interpretation has been heavily modified by recent scholars, such as the superb Averil Cameron, who tend to emphasize the discontinuities that wracked the emerging Byzantine world. Yet even when such worthy revisionism is taken into account, Byzantium may be seen to have possessed a core stability (not least in the survival of a strongly centralized state in which tax collection and an army carried on uninterrupted) not present in the outlying areas.

The Byzantines' deep connection with the past cut two ways. On one hand, it offered a sense of identity and prestige. On the other hand, it left the Byzantines isolated among their neighbors and at times uneasy with their own newer ways, which tended to conflict with their older ones. This schizophrenic tendency was nowhere more pronounced than in the prickly relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian faith. As we try to grasp the outlines of Byzantium's internal history, it will help to keep this overall situation in mind.

* * *

The old Rome had decreased in importance long before Constantine decided to build the new one. For about a century before Constantine's time, emperors had essentially kept a mobile capital, a jerry-built administrative body that clanked around the empire, usually following the army but from time to time descending on cities that one or another emperor would aggrandize for the purpose. In building his own imperial seat, historians such as Ramsay MacMullen and Averil Cameron remind us, Constantine was doing no more than his immediate predecessors, and who is to say what he really had in mind? On the other hand, it must be said, none of the other capitals had ever been exalted as the New Rome.

The empire's administrative transience parallels—and was probably not entirely unconnected with—a larger sense of social instability, a jitteriness, that dogged it during the third century. Economic woes, looming barbarians, religious and social tensions, a powerful and capricious army that made and killed off emperors with alarming rapidity—these and other problems combined to give the general impression that the third century was not a very pleasant or reassuring time to be a Roman citizen. Constantine and predecessor Diocletian (ruled 284-306 AD) attacked these problems with a series of reforms, stabilizing both currency and government. The end result was a new (though not unrecognizably so) system that divided civilian and military authority, leaving government in the hands of civilian administrators rather than of ambitious and unruly soldiers. The new system would stay in place until the time of Heraclius in the seventh century. Constantine kept up the spirit of most of Diocletian's policies, but where he parted company with his predecessor he did it in a big way. Diocletian had despised Christianity and had carried out the most severe persecutions in the empire's history. He had good reason to be worried about its appeal. The harsh uncertainties of the third century had attracted huge numbers to the church, so that by Diocletian's reign at century's end Christians amounted to an estimated five million or so, perhaps just under ten percent of the empire's total population.

The reasons for this success make up one of history's great puzzles—and like all such questions, it will probably never be fully understood. But chief among the reasons for it must be a quality that lent the church's early progress an almost mathematical feel: its peculiar blend of proselytizing exclusivity. Judaism, while excluding the worship of other gods by its followers, had as a rule not actively sought converts. On the other side of the coin, within the easy-going polytheistic Roman system a spate of alternative "mystery" cults had arisen that did seek converts, yet allowed them to worship other gods as well. Christianity's radical adaptation was to combine both proselytizing and exclusivity in a new and highly potent formulation. The followers of Christ took the ancient, small-scale monotheism of the Jews and mutated it into a new and virulent strain, like a fatal but hard-to-spread virus becoming airborne, suddenly combining deadliness with extreme communicability.

Ramsay MacMullen, a leading social historian of the Roman empire, stresses this "inherent antagonism," which emerged from the combination of Christianity's monotheistic pedigree with its Greco-Roman environment. In MacMullen's words, Christianity was unique in that it "destroyed belief as well as creating it."

This is not to suggest that Christianity lacked a warm and human face. Far from it. Indeed, human warmth was one of its first assets in a world that was increasingly disillusioned with the austere and impersonal gods of the classical past. Public charity, a strong sense of community, a cohesive and powerful moral message—all these were among the church's attractions during a time when the traditional sources of such emoluments were either drying up or unable to compete. Add to them the promise of a better world to come for true believers, which was a novel element but ever since has proved an especially powerful one in hard times. Between Constantine and Heraclius, Christianity's status rose as if in a line on a chart, from favored, to dominant, to pervasive.

But this is not a book about the early church. Among the many such books, two of the best are Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom* and Judith Herrin's *The Formation of Christendom*, both of which are exceptionally well-written and may be enjoyed by the general reader or student. Instead, we'll merely trace the rise within the Roman empire of this odd version of monotheism. (After all, you've got to wonder about a supposedly monotheistic faith that worships a trinity plus a virgin, not to mention all those saints.)

The empire, of course, didn't suddenly wake up Christian. During the third century, the groundwork had been laid for a two-pronged attack. At the top end, in the airy upper regions of Greek intellectual culture, Church fathers such as Clement (c. 150-215 AD) and Origen (c. 185-254 AD) had begun the monumental task of reconciling Christian teachings with those of the pagan philosophers. The weighty body of Greek philosophy was simply too imposing to be ignored, Plato especially. In making a start on bringing Christian ideas into line with this established and highly developed tradition, the early fathers provided a basis for the massive edifice of Christian theology.

That would pay off in the future. But it was at the low end of the scale that the most immediately vital progress was made.

This is where the mathematical feel of Christianity's uniquely aggressive attitude comes in. Statisticians use a concept they call "the Drunkard's Walk" to illustrate how random events can take on the appearance of moving in a certain direction, lending weight to the perception that some supernatural agency is at work. A drunkard staggers on the sidewalk, facing out toward the street, with the gutter ahead of him and the wall of the saloon behind him. He staggers either forward or backward, at random, with each stagger's direction independent of the others. Sooner or later, he's bound to end up in the gutter. The wall behind him acts like a "reflecting boundary," and statistical inevitability dictates that sooner or later, he'll take enough steps forward in a row to send him off the sidewalk. If you don't understand that, however, you might easily think that some other force was at work. The pagan world was like that sidewalk, only with two reflecting walls, so that the drunkard stayed on his feet.

Paganism, in other words, propelled its adherents back into the religious marketplace, maintaining their availability to other cults. Christianity removed one wall, taking them off the market for good.

Once Christianity reached a level where it was able to compete seriously, which it had done by about 150 AD, its growth slowly began gathering an aura of invincibility. And nothing, of course, could be better calculated to impress doubters. (We'll see the same sort of process, only accelerated by military success, later, with the third great monotheistic faith, Islam.) Christianity, above all, is seen by the newly converted as a potent faith, one whose adherents could expect help in this world as well as salvation in the next. Miracles, cures, and exorcisms—or the perception of them—played a huge role in winning converts in the age before Constantine.

And the claiming of an emperor supplied the catalyst for growth that was downright exponential. As Ramsay Macmullen puts it with ironic pith, Constantine's conversion "had quite enormous consequences."

So let's start with Constantine. We recall that he came to sole power in 324 AD, at a time when the empire had begun emerging from crisis. It still boasted the vast territory of classical times, but changes were afoot without and within. For one thing, the idea of dividing the empire into eastern and western halves had been established by Diocletian, who had appointed a senior and a junior emperor—an *augustus* and a *caesar*, that is—for each half. Constantine's father, Constantius, had been *augustus* for the west; Diocletian had kept the rich and developed east for himself, which should tell you something about where the power lay. Constantine had succeeded to the western half—or rather, succeeded in wiping out the competition, which consisted of the ambitious sons of other generals—over half a decade of civil war following his father's death in 306. His big victory happened in Rome, at the Milvian bridge, in 312. Just before this decisive battle (at least according to his later biographers, and depending on which source you read) he either saw a blazing cross in the sky or enjoyed a vision in which Christ came to him, showed him the Chi-Rho symbol to put on his soldiers' shields, and told him, "In this sign, you will conquer." (The Chi-Rho or *labarum* combines the first two letters of the word *Christ* in Greek; it looks like an X, or Chi, with a P, or Rho, superimposed on it.)

Of course, we don't have the foggiest idea what was really going on with all this. All we can say for sure is that after his victory Constantine publicly maintained that he owed the Christian god both his victory and his reverence. We can call it conversion if we like, but as Peter Brown points out, the real conversion came later, as Constantine grew ever more entangled in church matters—and with church officials. One of the first things he did (along with his new co-augustus, Licinius) was to issue the Edict of Milan in 313, formally lifting Diocletian's ban on Christianity. But if he thought that was the end of it, he was dreaming, for like all revolutions the Christian revolution changed the victors as much as the vanquished. To put it in 1960s terms, the church as radical underground was a very different thing from the church as establishment. As long as Christians were a persecuted minority, their differences counted less than their common identity. As soon as Constantine not only let the church into the open but gave it the stamp of imperial approval, countless dormant conflicts snarled to life seemingly overnight. A church formerly in hiding suddenly took center stage with a full spotlight. Some of the resulting tensions were overtly political: prestigious careers were now waiting to be made in the church, and revenges long put-off were now within striking distance. Some wanted to forgive those who had forsworn their faith under pressure of persecution, while others insisted on shunning them. Other tensions were doctrinal. Above all, church leaders now found it urgently necessary to decide what it was that they, as Christians, actually believed—and, even more importantly, what beliefs they demanded of others who wanted to call themselves Christians.

The ensuing struggle lends no small irony to the name that church historians have given this era: the "peace of the church." In reality, it was anything but. The two biggest conflicts centered on the nature of Christ, and go under the name Arianism and Monophysitism. Arianism, which emphasized Christ's humanity, was popular among the

western barbarians; Monophysitism thrived in Syria and Egypt. Both were ultimately condemned as heresies by the Orthodox church, and we shall see some of their consequences later. But over the whole rowdy scene hovers the colossal and authoritative, if often paternally baffled, presence of Constantine the Great.

Constantine presided over the earliest of a series of ecumenical councils, to which bishops came from all over the *oikoumene* or "domestic" world (the word comes from the same Greek root, *oikos* or "household," that gives us "economics" and "ecology"). We can almost refer to this world as Christendom, but not quite yet, since it was still enduring growing pains. Constantine first cajoled the bishops to end their disputes, then preached to them, then dictated, and finally he took to railing against their contentiousness. His dealings with them were characterized by growing brutality but only limited efficacy. He was sort a reverse founding father, George Washington's evil twin, whose immense personal authority fell just short of containing church within state (whereas Washington's at the Constitutional Convention shepherded their rational separation). Yet Constantine succeeded more by succeeding less. If he'd had his way, imposing on the church the resolutions of its squabbles, he would likely have gutted what turned out to be Byzantium's strongest source of cohesion. For another thousand years or more the dynamic tension between church and state would remain the creative backbone of the Byzantine world, and on pretty much the same model as that established by Constantine's partial success.

The church was incredibly quick off the mark when the light turned green. It found the power points of the complex, literate, variegated society of the Roman empire and filled them in with its own personnel almost overnight. Peter Brown has traced out this strange and in some ways elegant process, which we can do little more than allude to here. But in the century following Constantine's conversion, bishops came to stand where senators had been, often springing from the same bloodlines; other bishops took over the role of *rhetor*, the public speakers and teachers of rhetoric who had played such a significant part in Greco-Roman culture; and monks had begun edging out the still-feisty old-style philosophers as society's archetypal "wise men."

But in the Byzantine east, the monks would also become much more. While the bishops strode the corridors of official power, the monks came to wield impressive personal authority in the emerging Byzantine world. And we're not talking about a few chubby robed figures in some remote cloister marking out their own irrelevance in half-hearted prayers and chants. Instead, think of Stephen Hawking, Bruce Willis, and Sting, rolled into one. The monks were the geniuses, action heroes, and flamboyant pop stars of this new Christian culture. Their profound wisdom held the cosmos in thrall; their brisk karate chops beat countless demons into submission (popular biographies of holy men are filled with such action sequences); the purity of their *charisma* mesmerized rapt audiences. They, not the well-connected bishops, were the powerhouse behind the church's growth in the fourth century. And they, not the bishops, would become the saints to whom the common folk would turn in their times of crisis and distress.

* * *

By the end of the fourth century, the empire was well on the way to being Christian. In less than a century, the number of Christians had risen from around 5 million to an estimated 35 million, over half the empire's total population of about 60 million. Christianity's growth continued during the fifth century, so that by the time of Justinian (ruled 518-65) it was unusual though not unheard of to be a practicing pagan. It had not been easy. Doctrinal conflicts, especially over Monophysitism, still wracked the church, and there had also been bloody riots between Christians and pagans in many of the empire's large cities. The church's growth also brought less and less tolerance for those who did not fit in with this new Christian society, primarily pagans and Jews. Justinian angered even many Christians when he shut down the venerable school of Platonic philosophy in Athens in 527. He also introduced a ton of legislation, covering virtually every aspect of life including religion, and on top of that compiled all the messy accumulated legislation of his predecessors (an achievement that survives in European law today, and even in Louisiana, where it was left by the French and is called the Napoleonic Code).

But the main thing Justinian is remembered for—aside from his brilliant, courageous, and vivacious wife, the stripper-turned-empress Theodora, at least as she has been immortalized by *The Secret History* of Procopius—is his famous "Reconquest." Over the century or so before Justinian's accession, the German barbarians had taken over the empire's eastern half. Much of it they ruled outright, but in Italy for some time at least the immigrants pretended that they were Romans and allowed a puppet emperor to be appointed from Constantinople. They were, after all, an alien minority, and it helped to keep the real Roman populace happy. But in 476, the German king Odoacer deposed the last Roman emperor in the west, who was known ironically as Romulus Augustulus—Romulus being one of Rome's legendary founders, and Augustulus being the diminutive of Augustus, the first emperor. Odoacer declared himself king of Italy, and no one argued with him, at least for the time being. Later, however, the Byzantines encouraged another Germanic tribe, the Ostrogoths, to enter Italy, and in 493 their king, Theodoric, killed Odoacer (with his own hands, we're told) and took his place.

This was fine with the Byzantines for the moment, since they were in the middle of a doctrinal dispute with the pope and needed Theodoric's cooperation and support. But one of Justinian's first accomplishments was to patch things up with the papacy. That left the Byzantines on firmer ground in with the old Roman elites, and after Theodoric's death in 526 relations between Ravenna (Italy's administrative capital in this period) and Constantinople worsened. Besides, other imperial territory in the west had fallen to the roving Germans: Spain to the Visigoths, North Africa to the Vandals. *Romanitas* in Justinian's day had not yet become a thing of the past.

So, to reconquer what had been lost. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time. Justinian's able general, Belisarius, started out with a bang, taking North Africa with shocking ease from the surprisingly brittle Vandals. And the invasion of Italy that followed seemed similarly well judged, with the rapid surrender of the Gothic king and the easy capture of Ravenna.

That was in the glorious 530s, a golden decade for Justinian and Byzantium, a decade made possible only by the courage of Justinian's wife. At least according to Procopius, the historian of Justinian's reign, it was Theodora who, during the terrible Nika riots of 532, persuaded the wavering emperor not to abandon Constantinople. Justinian stayed, won control, and was able to reassert himself. The rest of the 530s were years of achievement and conquest.

The trouble with the 530s, however, is that they were followed by the 540s. This is where Justinian's role as a fulcrum comes in, for the rotten 540s were the absolute center of the balance, the hinge, between the old Roman world and the new Byzantine one.

And were they ever rotten. Plague, first of all, deadly bubonic plague, the likes of which would not be seen again until the Black Death of 1348, hit the empire hard in the early part of the decade and would continue to strike for the next two centuries. Procopius reports that at its height in 542 and 543, 10,000 people were dying each day in Constantinople alone. If anything Procopius said could be taken at face value (unfortunately, it can't), those numbers would be very scary indeed. It's similarly impossible to get firm numbers for the rest of the empire, but there's no doubt that the cumulative effect of the repeated outbreaks was crippling. The highest modern estimates are that the plague claimed as much as 60% of the empire's population during the sixth and seventh centuries.

At the same time, the Ostrogoths chose a new king, Totila, who was anything but the pushover his predecessor had been. Justinian was forced into a long and dirty campaign just when he could least afford it, and the ensuing havoc resulted in nothing less than the virtually complete devastation of the Italian peninsula. Having held out nearly to the last man, the Ostrogoths were broken, and disappear from history at this point, and at a savage cost. Not since the Punic Wars had the Italian countryside and cities been subjected to such a beating. Rome, of course, was a great prize, and therefore endured moronic sieges by both sides. By the time Totila was defeated and killed in 552, the eternal city's population stood at a straggly 30,000 or so.

Justinian combined some of the best and worst qualities of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon in one paranoid, driven, surprisingly effective yet oddly limited personality. Politically astute, a man of grand and possibly even noble intentions, he was sucked into a tragic, demoralizing and expensive war that casts an evil shadow over everything else he accomplished.

His counterpart to Johnson's social programs was a huge building spree, whose prime achievement came with the reconstruction of the great church of Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, in Constantinople. The original, supposedly built by Constantine himself, had been badly damaged by fire in 532 during the riots. Completed in 537, the new church was so magnificent that, on entering the finished building for the first time, Justinian is said to have exclaimed, "Solomon, I have surpassed you." Justinian built churches in major cities throughout the empire, along with a new system of frontier fortresses in both the east (against the Persians) and the Balkans (against the Slavs).

Such spending, though, especially when combined with the cost of the endless wars and the effects of the plague, left the empire dangerously exhausted, literally overtaxed. Justinian's tax collectors were particularly notorious, and had been one of the main reasons for the riots of 532. Ideologically oppressive when it came to pagans and pagan culture, and certainly a master of political dirty tricks, Justinian may have won his Vietnam—technically, at least—but his last twenty years in office lacked the verve and direction of the early days. He bit off more than his empire could chew, and in the decades after his rule it nearly choked to death.

Justinian died in 565. Within a few years, a new Germanic tribe, the Lombards, moved into ravaged Italy and took over the north. Much of Justinian's work in Italy was undone, though Rome and the south remained under Byzantine control for the time being. Pope Gregory the Great, for example, the brilliant Roman-born architect of the medieval papacy, acknowledged Byzantine supremacy in the late sixth century, as did his immediate successors. But the Lombards posed a constant threat to Rome, and the popes would eventually have to look elsewhere for protection.

* * *

We now come to the third and final movement of our transitional symphony, the reign of Heraclius, which lasted from 610 to 641. The main developments in the meantime were the growing aggression of the Persian empire and the insistent incursions of the Slavs and their overlords the Avars into Byzantine territory in the Balkans. Persia was the more urgent problem, one that demanded all the attention of Justinian's immediate successors. The best of them, Maurice, had just succeeded in winning some breathing space in the east so he could deal with the Slavs when, having pushed the army too far, he was overthrown and a junior officer named Phocas installed in his place. Phocas was a washout, a total disaster. He lasted eight disruptive years before Heraclius, the son of the Byzantine governor of North Africa, sailed into the Bosphorus in 610 and simply took over. Everyone had had quite enough of Phocas, at whose door much, indeed, may be laid.

Heraclius would have made a good subject for a Shakespearian tragedy. He had a dogged, heroic quality, a Job-like faith and commitment to duty. If anyone deserved to win in the end, he did. He was tall and strong and blond. Manly. He survived defeat after defeat for the first half of his reign, itself a remarkable achievement, testimony to how much faith the army had in him (or at least to how desperate they were). He worked and worked and worked to rescue the empire, persevered against chilling odds, took the right chance at the right moment, won the brilliant gamble, defeated the mortal foe—and then lost everything to an enemy he never saw coming.

Phocas' usurpation and reign had left the empire frazzled. During the 610s, the Persian king Chosroes II took advantage of this weakness to change the terms of his empire's long conflict with Rome. As the true extent of the empire's infirmity revealed itself, Chosroes realized he wouldn't have to settle for the payments and territorial concessions

that usually came when one side or the other temporarily got the edge. Things were different now. Rome was in trouble, and Chosroes decided to settle for nothing less than complete conquest. From a centuries-long border dispute between balanced partners, each warily respecting the other, the contest now became a struggle to the death.

At the same time, it also took on the aura of a religious crusade, Roman state Christianity pitted against Persian state Zoroastrianism. For the Byzantines, the religious nature of the war was brought into sharp relief by the humiliating sack of Jerusalem in 614. The Persians' destruction of churches and gleeful capture of Christian relics—especially fragments of the True Cross—accented the terrible slaughter.

By the end of the decade, the Byzantines had lost Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, with their vital urban centers, to the Persians. Constantinople, starving without its regular shipments of Egyptian grain, must fall next. The Avars and the Slavs were running roughshod over the Balkans, often taking their raiding parties right up to the walls of Constantinople itself, bold as brass. Heraclius's strategy had been to let them have their way, concentrating his forces against Persia, but it seemed to have backfired. At one point, he was almost captured by the Avars in a surprise attack during negotiations, and had to flee for his life on horseback, making it back to the capital (so the story goes) only because he got rid of his imperial clothing and disguised himself as a peasant.

The Roman empire was over, finished, and everyone knew it. Heraclius came within a hair's breadth of moving the capital to Carthage, his father's base in North Africa. Yet he did not, overcome by the inconsolable dejection the idea not surprisingly caused in the city's populace. Instead, modern historians tell us, he undertook a drastic reorganization of the empire's structure, paring back the deadwood and stripping it down for action. He began dismantling the cumbersome dual administrative structures of civilian and military authority, in place since the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine, eventually parceling out sensitive parts of the empire into military divisions or *themes*, each governed by a general who reported directly to him.

For a dozen years, as he initiated these reforms, he played a waiting game with the empire's enemies, accumulating resources and letting the empire gather its strength. Finally, in 622, he made his move.

This time, he would lead the army himself, harking back to the days of warrior emperors like Constantine. His strategy was a bold one: he would avoid a pitched battle with the main Persian army at first, instead circling down through the Caucasus and Armenia, building up crucial alliances, and then, strengthened, driving into the heart of Persian territory from the north. Let the Persians have their way in Asia Minor; Constantinople would hold out. He was banking on his greatest strength, the invincibility of the city's massive fortifications. In effect, he was gambling that his capital was stronger and more defensible than theirs.

It was a shrewd plan, but it very nearly failed. While Heraclius was in the field, the Persians and Avars put their heads together and attacked the city in a joint action. The Roman navy saved the day, however, breaking the siege and defeating the Avars by sea.

The Avars would never again pose a real threat to the empire. And the following year, deep in Persian territory at Nineveh, Heraclius finally faced and shattered the main Persian army. Within months, he had occupied the Persian capital, Ctesiphon, and installed a puppet king. The empire's troubles seemed to be over. Heraclius returned to Constantinople, where he celebrated a triumph, the ancient Roman victory procession.

It was not, however, a procession that Julius Caesar would have recognized. It was not really a Roman procession at all. It was Byzantine. Justinian, too, had held a triumph for his victorious general, Belisarius. Justinian's version, while it certainly couldn't be pagan in flavor, wasn't exactly Christian, either. It was a secular state occasion, and the procession wound its way accordingly to the Hippodrome, the huge public arena that was part of the palace complex.

Heraclius's triumph, in contrast, was unmistakably Christian. As such, it reflected the new crusading tone that had emerged during the war. Its climax took place not at the Hippodrome, though it ended there with the usual public display, but earlier, at Justinian's great church of Hagia Sophia. There the emperor was met by the patriarch Sergius, who had inspired the city's heroic defense during the siege of 626, and the two prostrated themselves before an icon of the Virgin Mary.

And here we have something else new: the icon. Or rather something old that had found new importance. It was during the late fifth century that these religious portraits had begun to acquire a real potency in the eyes of the faithful. The icons were not just artistic representations of holy people. They were more like relics, little pieces of holiness themselves. By virtue of this nearly tangible holiness, they also acquired a civic function, as the protectors of the empire's cities in times of war or other hardship. In the city of Thessalonica, for example, in northern Greece, icons of St. Demetrius, the city's patron saint, were credited with turning back siege after siege by the raiding Slavs. And during the siege of Constantinople in 626, the patriarch Sergius was seen over and over, parading along the city's walls holding up an icon Constantinople's patron, the Blessed Virgin.

The empire itself was also seen as being under divine protection. Since the campaigns of Maurice, icons had begun replacing the traditional Roman standard at the head of the troops. From now on, more and more of the emperor's time would be taken up with solemn liturgical functions, processions and the like, that publicly demonstrated this connection, to that people could see that protection was properly ensured. Alongside this religious message, woven into it, was a new emphasis on the power and pomp of the imperial office itself. This strengthening of the emperor's autocratic image had its roots as far back as Diocletian. Constantine and his Christian successors magisterially injected the church and its rituals into it. Once an enemy of empire, then its adjunct, Christianity was now becoming identical with it.

Finally, Heraclius at last got rid of Latin, which no one in the east really spoke anyway, but to which government had stubbornly clung as its official language. Justinian was the last emperor who spoke it. He had reveled in the sonorous titles of Roman tradition,

advertising his martial prowess by adding his victims' names to the list like notches in the handle of a gun: *Imperator Caesar Flavius Justinianus, Alamannicus, Gothicus, Franciscus, Germanicus, Anticus, Alanicus, Vandalicus, Africanus, Pius Felix Inclitus, Victor ac Triumphator, semper Augustus*. Heraclius dropped all that sort of thing, and styled himself simply *Basileus*, the old Greek word originally meaning "king." Greek became the official language of the imperial administration, though Latin words were used to lend a feel of authenticity and legitimacy, much as they still are today in government and the law.

So—magnificent triumph, potent icons, reconquered territory, shattered foes: everyone in the empire must have breathed a big sigh of relief, for Heraclius had saved the day. But the fat lady had not yet sung. In 622, the same year that Heraclius marched out against the Persians, far to the south among the desert tribes of Arabia a local mystic named Muhammad had taken refuge from his Meccan persecutors in the nearby town of Medina. This was the *hijra*, the sojourn that allowed Muhammad to build his strength and spread his message so that, a few years later, he could return to Mecca in victory. When he died in 632, Muhammad had consolidated Arabia under the banner of Islam and had made a few exploratory incursions into Byzantine territory to the north. His lieutenants returned with a vengeance after his death, and found virtually no resistance among the exhausted cities of the Byzantine Levant. Damascus fell to the Arabs in 635; the following year an Arab army crushed the Byzantines at the battle of the Yarmuk river. Jerusalem surrendered in 638; shortly thereafter, the Arabs invaded Egypt. Heraclius watched helplessly as, in a few short years, all his hard-won achievements were torpedoed. The brutality of the blow unbalanced him, and at his death in 641 there was little left of the vigorous hero who had saved the empire.

Heraclius died a broken man, but his shattered triumph over the Persians left his real and lasting work standing in sharp relief: not the military conquests whose effects proved so fleeting, but the seed of renewal he had planted while preparing his desperate campaign. It was not the war effort that ended up truly saving the day, but the comparatively unglamorous administrative structure on which the war effort had been based. The *theme* system, under which Heraclius had unified civilian and military command in key areas, was taken up by his successors so that eventually it was applied, bit by bit, to all of the empire's remaining territory. The word *theme* (Greek for "emplacement") came to designate not only these local army commands, but also the territorial divisions in which they were stationed. Over time the theme replaced the province as the empire's basic administrative unit, and a deeply militarized, no-frills, society was forged, one that withstood the next two centuries or so of constant defensive warfare against the Arabs. Heraclius's efforts, in the end, were redeemed by the survival of the Byzantine state.

Or at least, that's the way that George Ostrogorsky, whose monumental *History of the Byzantine State* used to have the last word in such matters, tells it. More recently, some scholars have found the origins of the theme system to be a little murkier, suspecting that maybe Heraclius deserves less credit and his successors more. Others have defended Ostrogorsky, whose views (as they do on most such issues) comprise the "traditional" interpretation. Heraclius, we can say, did at least undertake some reorganization of the army, and to some degree seems to have started—or maybe continued—a trend toward

putting civil and military authority together, under a single general. Maybe. Sorry about the murk, but there you are. They don't call this the dark age of Byzantium for nothing. However the themes arose, they were vitally important for Byzantium's survival, so keep them in mind as we move forward.

* * *

There are two things we should touch on before we say good-bye to Late Antiquity. They're related to each other: first, the religious disputes that began as soon as Constantine let the church out of the closet; and second, the great cities that gave the eastern Mediterranean so much of its resilience when things in the more sparsely populated West were falling apart.

The reason these two things were related is that the cities provided the bishops—the church's official leadership—and the bishops did most of the squabbling. People in the cities became closely identified with the ideological stances of "their" bishops, and the resulting local feeling generally added to the difficulty of working things out. For example, the two biggest controversies of the early centuries after Constantine, Arianism and Monophysitism, both often pitted Constantinople against Alexandria, Egypt's leading city. Another major "heresy," Nestorianism, was championed by the East's third great city, Antioch, in Syria. (It wasn't always so cut-and-dried, however: all of these -isms at different times enjoyed imperial support and had their own adherents on the patriarchal throne in Constantinople, and they all had a shot at surviving as Orthodoxy—in which case, of course, what eventually became Orthodoxy would have joined the -isms.)

The bone of contention in these disputes was the nature of Jesus—was he a man, or god, or what? (For this reason, scholars describe the resulting controversies as "Christological.") It was the slipperiest question that the early church had to face, and there were many possible answers.

Arians, for example, were very clear that Jesus had come along after God and therefore was not "coeternal with the Father." Nestorians knew beyond any doubt that Jesus had a divine self and a human self but that the two had absolutely nothing to do with each other. Monophysites had more than a hunch that he was essentially divine and therefore not really human at all. The Orthodox position, hammered out in church council after excruciating church council and particularly at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, was that Jesus the Son had been around as long as God the Father, that He and God were made up of the same substance, that He was both fully human and fully divine—two selves with a single personality—and that any apparent contradiction arose from our own limits in understanding.

In the end, though, it all really came down to politics. Along with Jerusalem, the fourth of the East's great cities, and Rome, the only one of the West's, Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria provided the five bishops who, as the patriarchs of the church, made up the top level of church leadership, the so-called "pentarchy" or "rule by five." Each city

had a particular pedigree which led its partisans to claim the ecclesiastical high ground, but in the fifth century, after much jockeying for position, an order of precedence for the five patriarchs was agreed upon. Rome would be preeminent, as the see of St. Peter and the empire's former capital; Constantinople would be second, in deference to its prestige as the new capital of the Christian empire; Alexandria came a bitter and recalcitrant third, never really giving up the fight for second and thus always resenting the upstart on the Bosphorus; then came Antioch, with a similar resentment of Alexandria; and finally poor old Jerusalem, whose mere sacredness dwindled to insignificance next to the worldly considerations advanced by the other four.

Not surprisingly, this rather tenuous arrangement proved unequal to the pressure of changing circumstances. In the end it was the Monophysites, strong not only in Egypt but in Syria and Palestine as well, who caused the most trouble. (The Nestorians basically migrated to Persia, though that doesn't mean you should forget about them. For the story of how they helped pass on Greek philosophy, science, and medicine to Persian and, later, Arab scholars, see Part II of *Sailing from Byzantium*.) We don't really know why the Monophysites, who took their name from the Greek for "one nature" (*mono + physis*), insisted so strongly on Christ's exclusive divinity. Probably some local feeling played a role, but equally probably there were other factors at work (perhaps having to do with indigenous religious attitudes) that have simply been lost in the shuffle. Similar questions and a similar lack of definite answers apply to Syria and Palestine, where, as in Egypt, hostility to Constantinople and its rigid enforcement of Orthodoxy meant that the Muslims, if not exactly welcomed, weren't resisted too strongly either.

If the Monophysites were happy to be rid of the empire, in the long run the empire was probably no less happy to be rid of them. But the toughest part of the whole situation was Rome's absolute refusal to accept any compromise with with the Orthodox position. Popes in those days were often more "orthodox" than their eastern counterparts, which may strike you as a little confusing, but in their relative isolation they didn't have to worry so much about being consiliatory. The popes' rigidity often left the emperor and the patriarch of Constantinople stuck in the middle, between two extremes of the dispute *du jour*. Justinian and Heraclius, for example, had fits trying to bring Monophysites and Orthodox Chalcedonians together and only succeeded in alienating both further. The empire's loss of Egypt had been compared to the amputation of a gangrenous limb—painful and shocking at first, to be sure, but the rest of your body will thank you later. The same holds true for Syria and Palestine, though to a lesser degree. The bottom line is that in losing all three of the eastern cities that could rival Constantinople, the empire gained no small measure of cohesion in return. The Orthodox patriarchs of those cities continued to exercise influence in the church, but in a much more limited way.

That left Rome and Constantinople to slug it out over the doctrinal sandbox. Or rather, as we'll see in the next installment, to sulk and turn their backs on each other. So in the Byzantine world, it really left just Constantinople, which now more and more came to dominate life in what was left of the empire. Not only in religion and politics, but in other areas as well, such as art and literature, what scholars call the "polycentric" world of the old empire now became smaller, tighter, and "monocentric." All roads led to the New Rome. Byzantium's dark age had begun.