The Rise and Fall of the Byzantine Empire

By the end of the third century CE, the Roman Empire was in serious trouble. The economy was weak, leadership was corrupt, and invaders were settling near the borders of the empire or moving into the empire. In 284 CE, Emperor Diocletian decided that the best hope for the Roman Empire was to split it into two sections. He believed this would make it easier to rule the huge Roman Empire. The Western Roman Empire continued its decline until Romans lost control of the throne. However, the eastern part of the empire experienced a very different fate. Emperor Constantine I, a friend of Diocletian, came to power in 306 CE. His leadership set the Byzantine Empire in the right direction.

The Byzantine Empire was ideally situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The empire straddled a narrow waterway between the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. The region had been a crossroads of trade throughout history. The ancient city of Byzantium became the capital of the new empire. In 330, Constantine renamed the city Constantinople, and built strong walls around it. Constantine invested the profits he gained from trade and built a strong army. The Byzantine Empire prospered for a thousand years.

Constantine and the emperors that followed promoted Christianity. In 380 CE, Christianity became the official state religion. Latin was the official language of the empire until 620. Ancient Greek customs were also saved. The military and state government were modeled after the Greek model and after 620, Greek replaced Latin as the official language. Greek and Roman artifacts were shipped to Constantinople for safekeeping.
The Byzantine Empire prospered under capable leadership. Some, but not all leaders, came from wealthy backgrounds. The greatest leader of the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian I, came from a peasant background. In 527 CE, Justinian took control of the throne after his uncle, the emperor, died. Under Justinian I, the empire gained territory and would reach the peak of its power and wealth.

Justinian established many reforms. Many of his reforms had to do with laws. Most laws in the Byzantine Empire were Roman Laws. Justinian had the laws reviewed. He hired a group of men with special knowledge of the laws to gather all the laws into one book, The Body of Civil Law. The new law book, rewritten in simpler language, became known as Justinian’s Code.

Justinian made new laws too. He wrote laws that gave women in his empire more rights. They were able to inherit property. The idea of “innocent until proven guilty” was first included in Justinian’s Code. Many ideas from Justinian’s Code are included in modern law books today.

Justinian funded many public works projects. He financed the building of bridges, roads, aqueducts, and churches throughout the empire. Justinian had an underground cistern built to store water for people’s needs. He had orphanages and schools built for children.

Of all of the buildings Justinian had built, the finest by far was the Hagia Sophia. This church, the most important church in Constantinople had been destroyed during a rebellion (The Nika Rebellion) and Justinian was determined to have it rebuilt, better than before. It was meant to be a symbol of his power and God’s power. He didn’t care how much it cost. He ordered 10,000 men to work on the church. Architects and artists worked tirelessly. Gold from Egypt, white marble from Greece, and precious stones from North Africa were used. The building was a fabulous monument.

Justinian was considered a patron or supporter of the arts. He encouraged artists to develop new art styles. Byzantine artists created beautiful jewelry of gold and silver. One of the best known forms of Byzantine art was the creation of large mosaic pictures. The pictures were made from tiny pieces of glass or stone. The walls of homes, public buildings and churches were decorated with them. Icons were another art form mastered by the Byzantines. An icon is a religious image thought to have special power. The making of icons was a huge business in the empire.

Justinian faced many challenges during his rule as emperor. In 532 many people of Constantinople became frustrated with the high cost of war and the inequality of life for the poor. They organized a rebellion that nearly caused Justinian to give up his rule. Choosing not to flee, he rebuilt the city after these riots. The city faced terrible damage once again after a major earthquake hit and Justinian was forced to rebuild the city again. In 541, Constantinople
was hit by a plague. As many as 10,000 people died each day for four months. Almost half the population of the city died and the economy was ruined. Justinian himself became sick with the plague but managed to survive. The Empire he had sacrificed so much for was in shambles.

The Byzantine Empire would never have a ruler like Justinian again. Although he had many accomplishments, two stand out above all. The rebuilding of the Hagia Sophia was a symbol of Justinian’s dedication to the Church and the people of Constantinople. The Hagia Sophia, a symbol of the Byzantine Empire’s support for Christianity, was damaged by rioting and earthquakes. It still stands today and is a centerpiece of Byzantine culture. Today, it is maintained as a museum. His second great accomplishment is Justinian’s Code. The Code of Laws was fair and just. It protected common people and increased women’s rights throughout the empire. Both of these accomplishments represent Justinian’s hard work and good intentions.

In 1054 CE, the Catholic Church split over a disagreement about the power of the Church’s leader (the Pope). Constantinople became the head of the Eastern Orthodox Church and it no longer recognized the Catholic Church in Rome. The Pope remained the leader of the Catholic Church and the Emperor was recognized as the leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Because Byzantium/Constantinople was positioned at the narrow passage between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and because the city was built on the crossroads of Europe and Asia, it was always an important location for trade. As the Islamic Empire grew, this city became a crossroads for the meeting of very different cultures. The result was this region was often a battlefield for control of the land and water routes until the empire collapsed when defeated by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

Adapted from the following resources:
http://www.ducksters.com/history/middle_ages_byzantine_empire.php
The Middle East: The Byzantine Empire