

dedicated to the honor of the gods Tiw, Woden, and Thor survive as our “Tuesday,” “Wednesday,” and “Thursday,” while the most important day in the Christian calendar—Easter—derives its name from the pagan goddess Eostre. Within a century most of England’s warrior elites had become more or less fully Christianized, although conversion of the rural masses understandably took much longer. The last stronghold of paganism was the Isle of Wight, which formally adopted Christianity in 686.

But Christianity had existed in England prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. Early missionaries like St. Ninian and St. Patrick had converted many Celts in the early fourth and late fifth centuries. When the Anglo-Saxons drove the Celts into the highlands, Celtic Christianity went into exile as well. Cut off from the rest of the Christian world, it developed in isolation. It was a strongly rural and monastic version of Christianity, and it embraced a rigorous penitential discipline that may seem shocking today. Anyone found guilty of engaging in pre- or extramarital sex, for example, had to perform penance (that is, to live on bread and water) for up to three years, according to the *Penitential* of St. Columbanus. Whippings and banishment from the community also figured large in the penitential codes, but restriction of the diet remained the most common form of punishment for misbehavior. By the sixth and seventh centuries, Celtic Christianity had attained a high degree of scholarly and artistic sophistication, and Celtic monastic schools—especially those in Ireland—were probably the best in Europe at that time. Their most famous accomplishments were their magnificent illuminated manuscripts; the best-known of these today are the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Book of Kells*, which date to the eighth and early ninth centuries, respectively.

When the Anglo-Saxons adopted Roman Catholicism, the two versions of Christianity came head to head. Celtic Christianity differed from the Roman form in a number of ways, the most important being the rural and monastic character of the Celtic faith as opposed to the episcopal form of the Roman. The two churches also followed different calendars, the Celtic church using a lunar formula, the Roman church a solar formula. A council was convened at Whitby, in Northumbria, in 663 to settle the dispute.² At this so-called Synod of Whitby, the Roman Christians carried the day, and everyone present was called upon to declare obedience to the pope. Celtic Christianity survived in the highlands for nearly two hundred more years, but it gradually gave way to the Roman form. The Celtic influence can be seen in the unique persistence of ascetic discipline and intellectual rigor that characterized English monasticism.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The collapse of Roman rule in the fifth century set in motion a wave of political instability in the Mediterranean which we have already discussed in part. In the west, Visigothic Spain, Vandal North Africa, and Ostrogothic Italy eventually emerged as the dominant states; but more significant was the power and influence of the surviving eastern half of the Roman Empire centered on the city of Constantinople—the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine world was vast: It wrapped,

2. The king of Northumbria, named Oswy, was a Celtic Christian, but his wife Eanfled was a Roman Christian. Tiring of celebrating Easter on different days each year (and arguing about the difference), they decided to sponsor a debate between leaders of each church to settle the matter.

like a reversed letter “C,” around the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, incorporating all the territory that today makes up the countries of Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and Libya. Its predominant public and official culture was both Greek and Christian, but the empire comprised a wide array of ethnic, linguistic, social, and religious groups. Despite its size and complexity, however, the Byzantine world was relatively easy to govern at first. Centered on the Asia Minor land mass, the empire had a strong and diverse economic base that enabled it to withstand its frequent invaders, while the easy communications provided by the sea and the empire’s sophisticated administrative machinery provided a more or less constant degree of civic order. Unlike the west, it was an urban society with much higher levels of population density, literacy, and *per capita* wealth. Asia Minor and the Balkan regions were the main centers of grain production and animal husbandry, while fish, timber, and mineral ores came from the Black Sea territories; Greece contributed mostly wines and olive oil. Islands like Cyprus and Rhodes served as staging posts and sites of specialized industries like silk weaving. The manufacturing of raw goods into consumer products—textiles, metalwork, ceramics, handicrafts, tools, and luxury items—took place in the cities, which were also the centers of administration, education, and finance.

The most important of those cities, after Constantinople itself, were Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Thessalonica. Merchants, scholars, and diplomats from these cities traveled throughout the Mediterranean, up the Nile River, and down the Red Sea. The Byzantine *solidus*, a gold coin stamped with the image of the emperor, became the international currency standard.³ Hundreds of primary schools, urban academies, aristocratic salons, and private tutors passed on the intellectual and artistic tradition of classical Greece and Greek Christianity. Byzantine scholars remained devoted to the works of the ancients, so much so that most of their intellectual output consisted of commentaries on writers like Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Galen, and Euclid instead of original creations of their own. They compiled scores of dictionaries, grammars, encyclopedias, and catalogs to aid the reader of the classics. When they did attempt original works, they continued to follow classical models. For example, an early Byzantine historian like Menander the Protector, who composed a lengthy history of the years from 558 to 582, followed the ancient Greek tradition of writing detailed, analytical histories of specific events as Herodotus and Thucydides had done; these differed from the larger-scale universal narratives of the west. Unlike the ancients, however, early Byzantine scholars made little contribution to science.

In all the major cities, but especially in Constantinople, the populace was divided into powerful factions that were based not so much on economics or classes as they were volitional loyalties; indeed these factions—the most notorious of which were the “Greens” and “Blues” in Constantinople—bear close resemblance to the passionate (often violently so) loyalties between rival soccer teams in modern European cities. These groups did not represent particular political programs, nor did they consist of discrete ethnicities, yet their influence on events was significant: At public entertainments like chariot races or animal fights, these factions staged mass rallies that frequently bubbled over into stadium violence, and whenever any local ruler was alleged to favor a particular group its rivals

3. Archeologists have found evidence of *solidi* circulating all the way from Ireland to China.

quickly took to the streets. At least once, in the sixth century, team-violence nearly brought down the empire in a riot known as the Nike Rebellion.

When the last western emperor Romulus Augustulus was deposed in 476, his eastern colleague Zeno (474–491) claimed to rule the entire restored empire. His claim was fanciful, though, since he was hard put just to hold on to power in Constantinople, but Zeno and his successors kept an eye on what was happening with the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, and Franks, and they used to their advantage the western kings' tradition of turning to Constantinople for legitimization. Recall that Theodoric the Great's actual title was not "King of Italy" but *patricius*—that is, provincial governor for the eastern emperor. Even the fearsome Clovis, who might have settled for papal recognition as "King of the Franks," was thankful to receive appointment as *consul* from the Byzantine ruler Anastasius I (491–518).⁴

The two most important early Byzantine rulers were Justinian (527–565) and Heraclius (610–641); both were enormously ambitious men and grand failures. Justinian was the more complex personality. His parents were assimilationist peasant Goths from the Balkans, and from his birth in 493 he was brought up to admire and emulate classical culture. He received a good education and was in fact more comfortable speaking Latin than Greek. He trained for a legal career, had a keen eye for talent, and was deeply interested in art, especially architecture. While still a young man he became an aide to his uncle Justin, a military adventurer with high connections. Justin's years of service to Anastasius I resulted in his being appointed successor to the throne; by that time, however, Justin was so old and decrepit that his nephew actually ran the empire for him. This apprenticeship served Justinian well, for once he was himself proclaimed emperor, after Justin's death in 527, he already understood the machinery of government, and specifically the ways in which that machinery had to be reformed if the empire was to survive.

His reforms were the most far-reaching since those of Diocletian in the third century. He professionalized the provincial administration, placed his officials on fixed salaries, and reinstated the statutes requiring sons to follow their fathers' professions if those fathers held positions of public trust. At the same time he centralized more authorities and prerogatives to the throne. Modeling himself after Constantine, Justinian enunciated a political doctrine known as *Caesaropapism*, which held that the emperor not only controlled the political state but the state religion also. This idea had been initially formulated by Constantine's biographer, Eusebius, who argued that Constantine had been chosen by God Himself as both protector and leader of His Church; he even referred to Constantine as the Thirteenth Apostle. All the Byzantine rulers after Constantine believed that they ruled by divine right, but Justinian gave this belief its fullest expression. He did not claim to possess any spiritual authority, yet he presided over Church councils and ratified their decrees. He appointed the Patriarch of Constantinople, redefined heresy as a crime against the state, and undertook the construction of the greatest church in eastern Christendom, the Church of Hagia Sophia ("Holy Wisdom") in Constantinople.

Hagia Sophia was in fact the culmination of a vast building program. Much of the capital city had been destroyed in a mass riot in 532 known as the Nike Rebellion.⁵ The revolt began as a fight between Greens and the Blues, fans of the

4. After getting the appointment, Clovis dressed in a toga and gave himself an imperial triumph through the city of Tours.

5. *Nike* is the Greek word for "Victory" and was reportedly the street chant of the rioters.

two most popular chariot-racing teams in the Hippodrome. Stirred up by nobles who had spread a number of false rumors about Justinian's loyalties, the fans, who numbered perhaps fifty thousand, filled the stadium with violence, wrecked much of the building, and took to the streets. The ruin they caused was enormous. They destroyed most of the city center and killed thousands of innocent bystanders. It took several days for imperial soldiers to put an end to the carnage, but Justinian ultimately prevailed. Determined to make an example, Justinian tracked down as many of the rebels (and the nobles who had incited them) as he could; one chronicler reports that the emperor had thirty thousand people executed for treason. Then, having stunned the empire to silence with his harshness, Justinian set quietly to work to rebuild the city. A descriptive catalog of his building projects, commissioned toward the end of his career, credits Justinian with erecting several hundred separate buildings. Apart from the great church, Justinian rebuilt the palace complex and the hospitals, strengthened the city's fortifications, redesigned the major avenues and arcades to allow for easier movement and more attractive open space, and constructed a comprehensive system of underground reservoirs and sewers that gave Constantinople the most reliable water and waste system of any city in Europe until the nineteenth century. Hagia Sophia, though, was his masterpiece.⁶ Composed chiefly of a vast central space formed by four great arches, the church was topped with a massive dome that rested on a row of clear glass windows that let in streams of light and made it appear that the dome was floating on air. A witness to the church's first public opening described it this way:

When the interior of the church came into view and the sun lit up the marvels of the sanctuary, all sorrows left our hearts. As the rose-colored light of the new day streamed in, driving away the dawn's dark shadows and leaping from arch to arch, all the princes and commoners in the crowd broke out in one voice and sang songs of praise and thanksgiving. In that sacred court it seemed to them that the almighty arches of the church were set in Heaven. . . . Anytime anyone goes into that church to pray, he immediately realizes that it was the hand of God, not of man, that made it; and his mind is so lifted up to God that he is convinced that God is not far away—for surely God must love to dwell here in this sacred space He has willed into existence.

Arguably the most important of his reforms, however, was Justinian's ordering of the first comprehensive codification of Roman law, a text known as the *Corpus iuris civilis* ("Corpus of Civil Law"). It was a mammoth undertaking. Roman law had been built up incrementally, with each ruler issuing new mandates or edicts to meet situations as they arose; but that legal system was already a thousand years old by the time Justinian came to the throne and it had never been organized. Justinian set a team of legal scholars to work sifting, arranging, dating, and classifying these laws into a useful compendium. It is in three parts. The first part, called the *Codex Justinianus*, gathered together every imperial edict from the preceding four centuries (laws later issued by Justinian himself and his successors were henceforth appended to this volume and were called *Novellae*, or "New Items"). Since these were the very centuries that saw the development of imperial autocracy, the *Codex Justinianus* served as a kind of handbook to emphasize and justify the absolute authority of the emperor. The second part, the *Digest*, contained all the precedent-setting legal judgments issued by Roman jurists in criminal and

6. Credit should go to the architects Justinian hired for the job: Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles. Both geometers by training, Hagia Sophia was their first attempt at architecture.

civil cases: Organized into fifty books, the Digest covered every aspect of life from assault to taxation, from commercial fraud to inheritance, from slave-practice to property rights, from murder to a city's right of eminent domain. It provided, in other words, a complete operational guide for governing civil society. The third and final part of the *Corpus*, called the *Institutes*, was an abridgment of the first two parts and was used as an introductory textbook for the study of law in the schools.

While the *Corpus iuris civilis* is hardly a fun book to read, its significance can hardly be overstated; indeed, the *Corpus* may be the single most influential secular text in western history. It contributed in no small way to the survival of Byzantine life for nine hundred years after Justinian by guiding and modulating the urban and commercial scene upon which Byzantine life depended. It provided the means for the development of jurisprudence itself by offering a comprehensive view of law as a rational system of social organization rather than a messy congeries of accumulated individual pronouncements. The legalistic bent of the Western mind is inconceivable without the *Corpus*, as is much of modern statecraft itself. In western Europe the *Corpus* provided the model for the development of the Catholic Church's system of canon law. The rediscovery of the text in the eleventh century helped to trigger the cultural and intellectual flowering of the twelfth-century renaissance, and as the *Corpus* began to be implemented by the emerging feudal states of that time it became the dominant influence on western secular law-codes as well. And moving beyond the Middle Ages, the emphasis of the *Codex Justinianus* on political autocracy provided a rational basis and historical justification for the political absolutism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the United States the system of precedent-setting torts can likewise be traced back directly to Justinian's achievement. The *Corpus iuris civilis* and *Hagia Sophia* are Justinian's two greatest monuments.

Apart from these achievements, Justinian is remembered for two stupendous failures: his attempt to reconquer the western Mediterranean, and his scandalous marriage. The two are linked, to a degree. Shortly before coming to the throne, Justinian, then forty, met a twenty-year-old actress named Theodora, the daughter of the bear-keeper at the Hippodrome and reputedly the most notorious prostitute in Constantinople.⁷ Justinian fell passionately in love with her—in Procopius' words, he became her sex-slave—and despite the adamant opposition of his family he married her. By any measure, she was a formidable personality. Haughty, quick to anger, and ambitious, she also possessed keen intelligence and acted as her husband's closest advisor. Theodora was, in fact, the coruler with Justinian; she shared authority over all imperial officials and received foreign embassies in her own right, although she did make them grovel on the ground before her.

Both Justinian and Theodora were hungry for glory, and they determined to achieve it by reconquering the western Mediterranean provinces. Byzantine claims over the west had never been relinquished but the opportunity to act on them had never arisen until Justinian's time. In 531 the Byzantine government signed a so-called eternal peace with its traditional rival, the Persian Empire to its east. Just

7. Most of what we know of Theodora comes from a wildly pornographic piece of political slander by Procopius of Caesarea, whom Justinian had appointed as his official biographer. Procopius dutifully published an authorized and praise-filled *History of Justinian*, and the catalog of building projects mentioned before; but he also published, anonymously, the *Secret History*, which is a masterpiece of character assassination. His portrayal of Theodora in particular is vulgar and cruel in the extreme and can hardly be believed. Nevertheless, he is correct about her low origins.

in case the eternal peace failed to live up to its name (which it soon did), Justinian built a chain of well-equipped fortresses throughout Syria. With his position supposedly thus assured, he loosed his forces on the central and western Mediterranean. They were led by his brilliant general Belisarius. The campaign began well, with a lightning strike against the Vandals that restored all of North Africa to Byzantine control. In 536 Belisarius landed in Sicily, which was then controlled by the Ostrogoths. He wrested the island from them and after four more years of fighting managed to take both Rome and Ravenna, the two traditional capitals of the western empire. But just as Justinian's dream seemed close at hand, the Persian ruler Chosroes I broke the eternal peace, crashed through the Syrian defenses, and sacked the city of Antioch. Now forced to fight a two-front war, Justinian soon exhausted his treasury and was forced to give up the fight. In the west, the Greeks were regarded as hostile foreign tyrants, and in order to hold on to what they had reconquered they were forced to resort to harsh, and occasionally brutal, tactics that only added to the atmosphere of fear and resentment. Meanwhile, the advance of the Persians in the east and the arrival of new invading groups of Avars, Bulgars, and Slavs from the Asian steppe in the Balkans left the Byzantine realm in considerable danger. Shortly after Justinian's death, the Greeks were forced to withdraw. By 578 they had abandoned Spain, North Africa, and coastal France altogether and held only a few small enclaves in northern Italy. Southern Italy, however, with its close proximity to Greece, remained tentatively in their hands. Justinian's successors Maurice (582–602) and Phocas (602–610) managed to stabilize the Balkan frontier by paying huge sums of tribute to the Avars, Bulgars, and Slavs but lost nearly all the rest of the empire to the Persians who quickly overran Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Asia Minor itself.

This was the situation when Heraclius (610–641) came to the throne. With half the empire in foreign hands, the treasury depleted, public morale low, and a civil administration that under his predecessors had become notoriously bloated and corrupt, Heraclius resolved on yet another reform of the state, one that culminated in an extensive militarization of Byzantine society. The eastern empire had traditionally relied on a professional military: Soldiers signed on for a certain number of years of service and were paid a salary by the state. They supplemented their salary with booty, when booty was to be had, and received a pension after twenty-five years of service. By 610, however, the soldiers' pay had been frequently delayed or cut off altogether, depending on the state of the imperial coffers. Understandably, this circumstance weakened the soldiers' resolve to fight and forced the emperors to turn to unreliable foreign mercenaries willing to fight for a share of the unreliable spoils. It was this situation that had enabled the Avars, Bulgars, and Slavs to overrun the Balkans so easily, and had allowed the Persians to advance so far into the empire's eastern provinces.

Heraclius began by reorganizing the army into a new system of *themes*.⁸ These themes had existed earlier as military units, but Heraclius began to identify individual themes with specific regions of the empire, and allowed the commanders of each theme to take over the civil administration of its corresponding district. In other words, he replaced the corrupt civil administration with the army itself. Direct pay to the soldiers was cut but was supplemented by the allotment of farmlands within each theme. This revision reduced the direct cost to the treasury, increased military morale (since the soldiers now had a reliable source of income),

8. The Greek word *theme* meant "regiment" or "division."

improved military effectiveness (since the soldiers had a vested interest in defending the land), and restored popular support for the imperial throne by removing the hated corps of bureaucrats who had overrun government in the years since Justinian's death.

Heraclius' reform stopped the hemorrhage of funds from the treasury but did little to replenish them. He raised taxes as high as he could without risking revolt, confiscated all that he could of the personal wealth of the displaced civil administrators, and relied occasionally on forced loans (especially from the empire's Jewish population); but by far his greatest new source of wealth was the eastern Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Sergius, who saw the empire's struggle to survive as a religious war, placed at Heraclius' disposal all the ecclesiastical and monastic treasure he commanded. This action—the State taking over the wealth of the Church in defense of the Christian faith—established an important precedent whose ramifications extended throughout the rest of the Middle Ages.

In the meantime, Byzantium's enemies pressed on all sides. Most significantly, Chosroes II unleashed a new campaign into the Holy Land. In 612 his forces (led by one of his generals, Shahr-Baraz, since Chosroes never took the field himself) smashed westward, took Antioch, then turned south and conquered Damascus in 613 and Jerusalem in 614. Religious antagonism played a role. Many of the region's Jews, tired of their minority status and smarting from Heraclius' forced loans, had supported the Persian advance. A month after the Persian seizure of the city, Jerusalem's Christians rose up in revolt and took to the streets, smashing shops and assaulting as many of the Persian invaders and their Jewish collaborators as they could find. Shahr-Baraz responded with unprecedented violence: For three days he pillaged Jerusalem ruthlessly, razing churches and slaughtering the Christians. According to some witnesses, Jews from the surrounding countryside rushed to the city in order to share in the revenge-taking. When the carnage ended, hardly a single Christian was alive and hardly a single Christian church remained standing—including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which stood over the site of Jesus' grave and contained what was believed to be a fragment of the Cross on which he had hung. A later chronicler, Theophanes, summed up the scene with a few terse words:

In this year the Persians conquered all of Jordan and Palestine, including the Holy City, and with the help of the Jews they killed a multitude of Christians—some say as many as ninety thousand of them. The Jews [from the countryside], for their part, bought many of the surviving Christians, whom the Persians were leading away as slaves, and put them to death too. The Persians captured and led away not only the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Zachariah, and many prisoners, but also the most precious and life-giving Cross.

Eyewitnesses estimated the number of slave-prisoners taken by the Persians between thirty-five and sixty-six thousand. Such figures are always suspect, but clearly the destruction of the city was a catastrophe. News of the slaughter horrified Christians throughout Byzantium and western Europe, and from this time onward a new element entered many medieval Christians' attitudes toward the east, an element of religious revenge-seeking that would culminate centuries later in the crusade movement.

Heraclius himself, although the word was not known at that time, possessed many of the qualities of a crusader. He combined genuine piety with military activism and an apocalyptic sense of mission; he had little doubt that he was engaged in a life-or-death struggle for the survival of the Christian world, or at

least the Greek-speaking portion of it, and that his foes were in fact the enemies of God. How else could one interpret the Persians' action? Chosroes II, in a mocking letter he sent to Constantinople, hammered the point home:

I, Chosroes the son of the great Hormisdas, the Most Noble of all the Gods, the King and Sovereign-Master over all the Earth, to Heraclius, my vile and brainless slave.

Refusing to submit yourself to my rule, you persist in calling yourself lord and sovereign. You pilfer and spend *my* treasure; you deceive *my* servants. You annoy me ceaselessly with your little gangs of brigands. Have I not brought you Greeks to your knees? You claim to trust in your God—but then why has your God not saved Caesarea, Jerusalem, and Alexandria from my wrath? . . . Could I not also destroy Constantinople itself, if I wished it?

Thus, when Heraclius was finally ready to launch his counterattack in 622, he deliberately chose targets of symbolic as well as strategic value. He sailed his forces out of Constantinople and all the way around Asia Minor to reach the Bay of Issus—the spot of Alexander the Great's first triumphant face-to-face battle with the ancient Persian ruler Darius nearly one thousand years earlier. Heraclius' first string of victories climaxed in his capture of Ganzak and Thebarmes (in what is today Azerbaijan), which were important spiritual centers of the Persians' Zoroastrian religion. After several more years of hard campaigning, Heraclius defeated the Persian army and regained most of the territory that had been lost to them. Chosroes himself fell from power in a palace coup.

The chief significance of Heraclius' reign lies in his militarization of society—a change that provided, to an extent, a precedent for what would become the feudalism of western Europe—and in the intensification of religious antagonism between the Christian, Jewish, and eastern faiths. The emerging states of the west, as we have seen, looked to Byzantium for ideas and political justification; Heraclius' theme system, while it differed in important ways from the feudal practices of the west, influenced their development. Still, the religious legacy of Heraclius' reign may have had even greater influence over what was to follow. Hitherto, most of Christianity's factional strife had been internal, centered on competing understandings of the Christian mysteries. But relations across religious lines had received a hard blow in the seventh century. Chosroes' successor on the Persian throne offered the Christians an olive branch—the restoration of all Byzantine territories, all Byzantine captives, and the surviving remnant of the True Cross—but that did little to dispel popular hostilities.

New violence could occur at any time, and in fact it was not long in coming. But an important change had taken place. In 622, at the very time when Heraclius launched his counterstrike against Persia, a charismatic spiritual leader in Mecca, in the Arabian peninsula, journeyed with his tiny band of followers to the city of Madinah. This journey became commemorated as the *Hijrah*, and it marked the formal beginning of a new religion and a new religious empire: Islam, under its leader Muhammad, the Prophet.

THE RISE OF ISLAM

Muhammad was born in the western Arabian city of Mecca, around 570. A merchant by trade, his family came from the Qur'aysh tribe that had traditionally served in priestly functions and was associated with the chief pagan temple, the Ka'ba. In 594 he married his employer, a well-to-do widow named Khadija (she