

# Post Classical World: The Byzantine Empire

## Origins

- Started off as part of Roman Empire
  - o Established as Eastern Roman Empire in 395 C.E. by emperor Theodosius I
  - o Original capital of Byzantium
    - 460 C.E. name changed to Constantinople
      - In honor of founder Constantine
      - City considered major world center after fall of Rome
      - Crossroads of European and Mesopotamian Culture
  - o Still referred to themselves as Romans
    - Referred to as Romans by neighbors
    - Called *Orientalis* by western Europeans
    - Historians established them as Byzantines to separate them from Western Empire
  - o Major differences from Romans
    - Greek language usage
      - Viewed Latin as barbaric
      - Emphasis on Greek revived interest in Hellenistic culture
  - o Similar to Romans
    - Christianity
      - Constantinople took role of protector of Christianity
        - o Had to deal with rising Muslim threat to holy land
      - Divine Right for Emperors
    - Agrarian based economy
      - Access to eastern Mediterranean agriculture = taxes = rich
    - Facing Barbarian threat
      - Sassanids and Germanic
      - Recruited and used middle Eastern troops instead of Barbarians
    - Elevated Emperor
      - Ceremonial purposes
      - Complex administration and bureaucracy
    - Hippodrome
      - Byzantine high culture centered on horse racing



## Emperor Justinian

- Humble origins
  - o Born a farmer
  - o Brought to Constantinople to be educated at young age
  - o Wife Theodora also of humble origins
    - Father was a bear-keeper
    - Mother was an acrobat
    - She worked as actress
      - Possibly also as prostitute
    - Converted to Christianity and became wool spinner
    - Justinian had law changed so a Patrician was able to marry an actress
- Gains throne in 527
  - o Co-Ruler with uncle Justin
- Considered last of the “Roman” Emperors
- Set himself on rebuilding the glory of Rome
- *Nika Riots*
  - o 532 C.E.
  - o Tax riots
  - o Led to destruction of much of the city
    - Allowed for building of grand *Hagia Sophia*
      - Holy Wisdom
    - Also built up cities’ defenses
  - o Justinian thought about leaving
    - Theodora convinced him to stay
      - Resulted in thousands dead as he reasserted his control



## Political Achievements

- Prior to Justinian used system of *Decurions*
  - o Roughly 200 members
  - o Local wealthy landowners
  - o Economic and intellectual elite
  - o Heavily taxed
- Barbarian threats
  - o Forced Justinian to use more direct control
    - Used loyal Governors instead of Decurions
- Justinian Initiates “One God, One Empire, One Religion”
  - o Centralize Government
  - o Increase Legal conformity throughout Empire
- Justinian co-ruler with Theodora
  - o Both held supreme power
    - Viewed all others as vastly inferior
- Codex Justinianus
  - o *Code* – Revision of Roman Law established by Roman emperors since Hadrian
    - Code used as basis for western law since 12<sup>th</sup> century
  - o *Novella* – Justinian’s edicts and those made right before him
  - o *Digest* – Opinions of old legal experts
  - o *Institutes* – Opinions of young legal scholars



## Expansion of Byzantine Influence

### Military Conquest

- Justinian tried to rebuild Roman empire
  - o Starting year 533 C.E.
  - o Conquered Vandal Kingdom in North Africa and Sicily
    - Resistance till 554 C.E.
  - o Took lands from Ostrogoths in Italy and parts of Spain
- Expansion's Impacts
  - o High Casualties
  - o Very Expensive
  - o Constantinople sickened by plague
  - o Treasury exhausted
  - o Not a lasting Empire
    - Most of African gains lost to Lombards and Muslims
    - Italy remained in Byzantine control till 11<sup>th</sup> Century
  - o Stresses helped contribute to Justinian's death in 565 C.E.

### Religious Conquest

- Byzantines facing pressure in North
    - o Avars, Slavs, Bulgars attacking Balkan area
      - Eventually converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity
  - Byzantines hoping to gain allies
    - o Threatened by Roman Christianity and Franks
    - o Used religion to help unify eastern European people
  - Language
    - o Byzantines send missionaries Cyril and Methodius to Moravians to convert and develop language
      - Helped Slavs create Greek based alphabet
        - Allowed Slavs to have written language
        - Alphabet called Cyrillic
      - Language spread
        - First to Bulgars
          - o Then Bohemians, Kievan Rus, and Ukrainians
      - Allowed for cultural developments within eastern Europe
- Growing threat
  - o After Justinian Byzantines soon had to deal with ever growing threat of Muslim empires to the south