

### Student Handout 1 – Guided Reading on the Byzantine Empire

The empire that we now know as the Byzantine Empire really began in the year 330 CE, when Constantine, the emperor of Rome at that time, decided to move the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to the city of Byzantium. Byzantium was originally a Greek colony on a strait linking the Mediterranean to the Black Sea around what is now Turkey. Located on a peninsula and protected by water, this location was easier to defend than Rome. Constantine named the new capital after himself, Constantinople. Constantine was the emperor who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

In 476, when the larger Roman Empire fell apart, its eastern half managed to stay together for almost another 1,000 years. Although they did not call themselves the Byzantine Empire, historians began to use this name to separate it from the original Roman Empire. The citizens of this empire tended to see themselves as Romans and Christians (this does not include certain groups of people with different religions who had been conquered by the Romans and who did not want to be part of this empire), even though many of them spoke Greek instead of Latin. Byzantine elites were educated in Greek culture and history as well.

The western part of the Roman Empire eventually fell, over 100 years after Constantine’s rule, yet the eastern part stayed intact, partly because it was easier to defend from outside invasion because of its unique geography and surrounding bodies of water. Its border with the rest of Europe was also much smaller than the western part of the Empire. Because Constantinople was the new capital, power, wealth, and military might were centered there. It was also located closer to the top trade routes, so the eastern part of the old Roman Empire was in a better position to stay strong and continue as an empire long after the western part of the empire collapsed.

Stop and Jot: So what is the difference between the Roman and Byzantine Empires?

In what ways was physical geography important for the Byzantine Empire?

The split of Rome into east and west also affected the development of Christianity at this time. In 451 CE, a council of religious leaders split the Christian world into five areas called “patriarchates,” each one ruled by a different leader. The church in Rome was led by a patriarch (male leader, father figure), who would later be known as the pope. The emperor of the Byzantine Empire was the religious leader of Constantinople and was head of both the eastern church and the government. There were three more regions that were eventually conquered by Islamic kingdoms, so the Byzantine emperor became the leader for Christians in the east. This shift broke the world of Christianity into two groups that would later come into conflict even though they shared the same basic belief system.

Stop and Jot: Why do you think religious leaders from the same belief system might have come into conflict with each other?

### The Byzantine Empire of Justinian



In 527, Justinian I became the emperor and ruled until he died in 565. He was the first powerful leader of the Byzantine Empire. In the years of his rule, his armies were able to increase the size of the empire by reconquering land lost when the Roman Empire broke up, including much of North Africa. Justinian also ordered the construction of many great monuments, including the domed Church of Holy Wisdom, or Hagia Sophia (532-37 A.D.). Justinian updated Roman law and had it published, creating a Byzantine legal system that lasted for hundreds of years and helped shape modern ideas about government and law.

When Justinian died, the Byzantine Empire was the most powerful empire in Europe, even though it never came close to the size and power that the old Roman Empire had achieved. Nevertheless, because of the constant war it took to regain and hold territory, the government owed lots of money and was struggling to gather more resources. To bring in more money, later emperors taxed their citizens greatly. At the same time, the army was weakened and it had a hard time holding on to the newly gained territory. Between 600 and 800 CE, there were many attacks on the empire, by the Slavs in the west

and by Persians in the east. Along with internal problems like rebellions against the emperor, these attacks made the empire even weaker. In 622, the religion of Islam was founded by the prophet Muhammad in the city of Mecca, and this began a new period of conflict in which Christians and Muslims fought for control of territory in the eastern Mediterranean. By 700 CE, the Byzantine Empire had lost Syria, Jerusalem, Egypt, and northern Africa.

Turn and Talk: How was Justinian similar to some of the Roman emperors of the past? How was his rule both similar to and different from the struggles emperors faced in old Rome?

During the late 10th and early 11th centuries, the Byzantine Empire enjoyed a time of greater peace and prosperity. Although it was smaller in size at this time than it had been under Justinian, there was a lot of trade and the empire was seen in a better light by its neighbors. Constantinople was a key city in world trade, and the arts flourished and many people studied ancient Greek ideas and history. Greek became the official language of the state as well. At the same time, the church began to encourage more outreach, and sent monks to convert people to Christianity in different areas, including Russia and the lands of the Slavs (where countries like Bulgaria and the Czech Republic are today).

At the end of the 11th century, the famous religious Crusades began. The Crusades were wars that centered on trying to regain land lost to Muslim kingdoms, and they pitted Christians against Muslims for close to 200 years. These wars were declared by Pope Urban II in France. European armies traveled to fight against the Arabic Muslim kingdoms, and they traveled through the Byzantine Empire, and even fought alongside the Byzantine Empire for a time as allies. The split between the Christians though, into east and west, affected their ability to trust each other and fight together, and problems arose. In 1204, Crusaders from the western part of Europe actually invaded and took over Constantinople, even though a Byzantine army eventually took it back. Over the next 200 years, beset with internal political problems and facing outside attackers that never completely went away, the Byzantine Empire lost power and eventually was completely taken over by a new power, the Ottoman Empire, in 1453.

*Adapted from: <http://www.history.com/topics/byzantine-empire>*

Work with your Turn and Talk partner now to generate Compare / Contrast T-chart. Identify and explain three ways the Byzantine Empire was similar to the Roman Empire from which it developed, and also identify and explain three ways it was different.