

Byzantine Culture and Society

Overview

- Constantinople was the center of Byzantine trade and culture and was incredibly diverse.
- The Byzantine Empire had an important cultural legacy, both on the Orthodox Church and on the revival of Greek and Roman studies, which influenced the Renaissance.
- The East-West Schism in 1041 divided the Christian world into the Orthodox Church—now the Eastern Orthodox Church—the Catholic Church—now Roman the Catholic Church. People living under the early Byzantine Empire saw themselves as Romans, but the culture of the empire changed over the centuries. As it incorporated Greek and Christian culture, it transformed into a unique Byzantine culture. Additionally, the Byzantine Empire was influenced by Latin, Coptic, Armenian, and Persian cultures. Later on, it was influenced by Islamic cultures as well.

Constantinople was an extremely diverse city. Its residents were multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Taxes for foreign traders were the same as for residents, which was pretty unique at that time. Byzantine merchants actively traded with regions in the Mediterranean as well as in the east and west, including areas around the Black Sea, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

Byzantine culture

The Byzantine Empire influenced many cultures, primarily due to its role in shaping Christian Orthodoxy. The modern-day Eastern Orthodox Church is the second largest Christian church in the world. Orthodoxy is central to the history and societies of Greece, Bulgaria, Russia, Serbia, and other countries.

Byzantine architecture, particularly in religious buildings, can be found in diverse regions from Egypt to Russia. During the Byzantine Renaissance—from 867 to 1056—art and literature flourished. Artists adopted a naturalistic style and complex techniques from ancient Greek and Roman art and mixed them with Christian themes. [Byzantine art](#) from this period had a strong influence on the later painters of the Italian Renaissance.



A golden-hued mosaic depicting a man with wings.

St. Michael mosaic, Monastery of Hosios Loukas. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In the period following the sacking of Constantinople in 1204 and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, people migrated out of Constantinople. Among these emigrants were many Byzantine scholars and artists, including grammarians, poets, writers, musicians, astronomers, architects, artists, scribes, philosophers, scientists, politicians and theologians.

The exodus of these people from Constantinople contributed to the revival of Greek and Roman studies, which led to the development of the Renaissance in humanism and science. Byzantine emigrants also brought to western Europe the better preserved and accumulated knowledge of their own Greek civilization.

Byzantine social structures

A central feature of Byzantine culture was Orthodox Christianity. Byzantine society was very religious, and it held certain values in high esteem, including a respect for order and traditional hierarchies. Family was at the center of society, and marriage, chastity, and celibacy were celebrated and respected.

Because family was so significant, women and mothers were seen as important members of the family unit, though some women joined monastic orders. Although moral attitudes about women dictated that they should be secluded in segregated spaces and avoid being outspoken, in practice this was not always the case. Women did have their own spaces, called *gynaikonitis*, where they engaged in activities like spinning and weaving, but other locations were not sharply segregated between men and women.



An illustration on red-colored pottery depicting women working together in an all-women space.

Detail from a piece of pottery showing Greek women weaving in a gynaikonitis, about 500 BC. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Despite some restrictions, many women had a role in public life and engaged in commercial activities. Women also had the right to inherit and often had independent wealth, which was frequently in the form of a dowry.

Women were seen by the church as spiritually equal to their male counterparts, and they played roles in convents. Noble women also patronized monasteries. However, women could not become priests in the church or have similar high roles.

Among royalty, the empresses Theodora—who lived from 500 to 548 CE—and Irene who lived from 752 to 803 CE—were notable for their power and influence. Theodora in particular is known for having influenced a series of reforms that were beneficial to women. She instituted policies prohibiting prostitution, creating convents, and instituting harsh punishments for rape and other forms of violence against women. The reforms also expanded divorce, child guardianship, and property ownership rights for women.

Eunuchs, men who had been castrated, were also an important part of Byzantine society. They were able to attain high positions in the Byzantine court, in part because they were regarded as trustworthy due to their inability to claim the throne and have descendents.

In addition to the elite classes at the top of society, Byzantine society had numerous social hierarchies among peasants, who were not a homogenous group. The lives of peasants differed greatly depending on whether they owned their own property or were dependant on private or state landowners. Over time, during the fourth to sixth centuries, the number of peasants who held small parcels of land declined, and peasants were increasingly tied to particular land parcels.

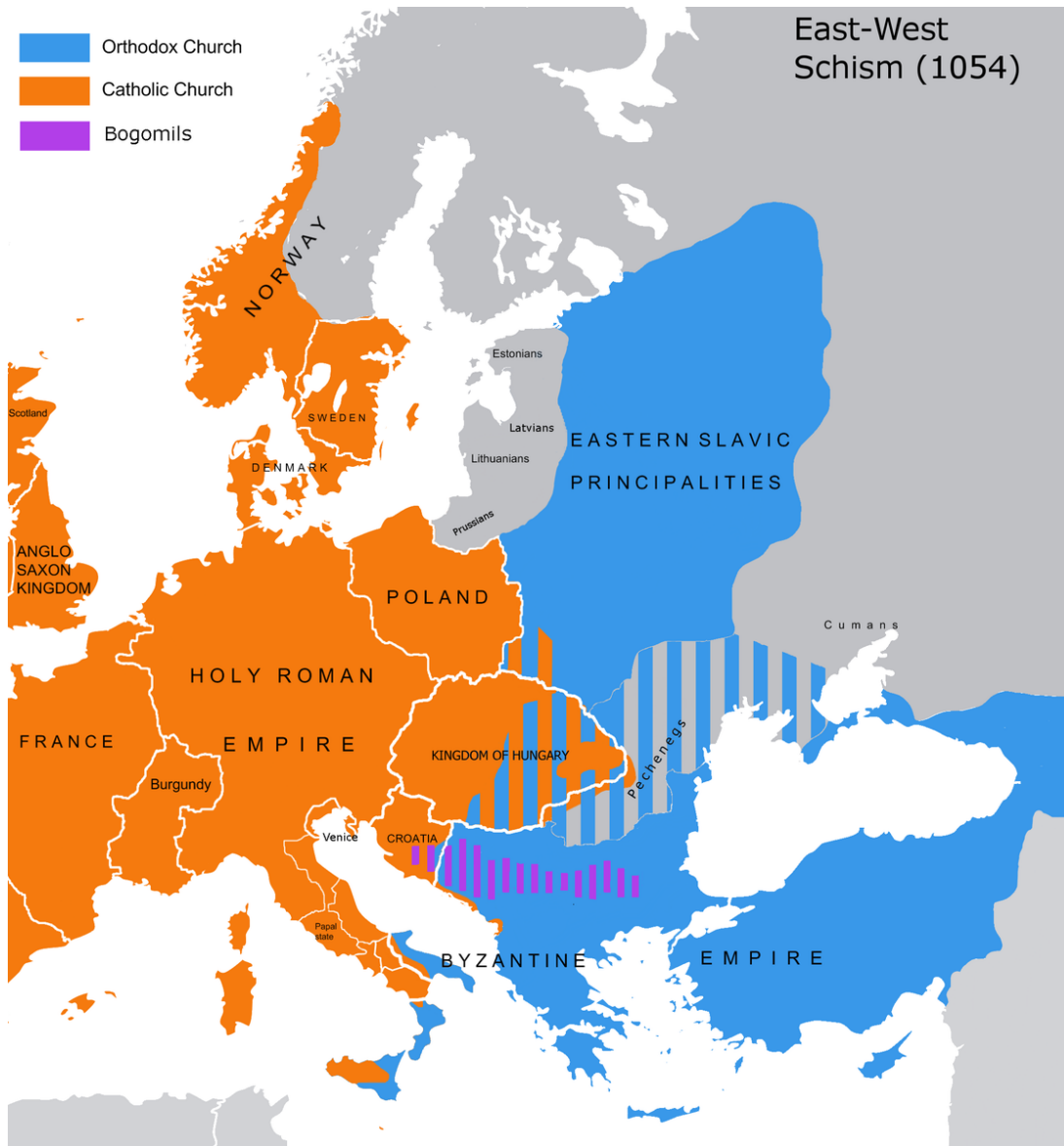
The East-West Schism

By the turn of the millennium, the Eastern Church of the Byzantine Empire and the Western Church of Rome had been gradually separating along religious fault lines for centuries.

The Byzantine **iconoclasm**—the destruction or prohibition of religious icons and other images or monuments for religious or political motives—ignited [a major controversy that lasted for a century](#) and widened the growing divergence between east and west. The Western Church remained firmly in support of the use of religious images, though the church was still unified at this time.

In addition, there were other disputes, including disagreement over the the source of the Holy Spirit, whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in the Eucharist, and the Bishop of Rome's claim to universal jurisdiction.

In response, the pope in the west declared a new emperor in Charlemagne, solidifying the rift and causing outrage in the east. The empire in the west became known as the Holy Roman Empire. Finally, 1054 CE saw the **East-West Schism**, the formal declaration of institutional separation between east, into the Orthodox Church—now the Eastern Orthodox Church—and west, into the Catholic Church—now the Roman Catholic Church.



Map of eastern-western allegiances in 1054 with former country borders.

Map of eastern-western allegiances in 1054 with former country borders. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:East-West_Schism_1054.jpg).

Decline

During the Early Middle Ages, despite significant territorial losses, the Byzantine Empire flourished. However, during the High Middle Ages, the Empire began to decline. It lost Anatolia, which is most of modern-day Turkey, during the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. It also suffered a defeat against the Normans in the same year. Its capital city was devastated during the Sacking of Constantinople in 1204.



Map of the changes in the borders of the Byzantine Empire from 476 to 1400 CE.

Map of the changes in the borders of the Byzantine Empire. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Even after Constantinople was reconquered by the Byzantines in 1261, the empire was drastically weakened. By the fifteenth century, Byzantine territory barely exceeded Constantinople. In 1453—when the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, renaming it Istanbul—the Byzantine Empire came to an end.