The Byzantine Empire
Basic Features of Byzantine Civilization

• Roman Imperial in its form of government;

• Orthodox Christian in religion

• Greek in its culture and language
From Eastern Roman to Byzantine Empire

A. **Constantinople** – imperial capital; center of a world empire; a Christian city under the protection of God;
B. Justinian (527-565)

Reconquers the Western Territories

- Determined to re-establish Roman rule in the west; attempted to reconquer; regains parts of North Africa, southern Italy; and parts of Spain;
- Criticized for overextending resources and draining revenue;
- Devastating plague in 542;
- Re-conquest of the west does not last;
Justinian
Justinian’s Code

Codification of Roman Law (Justinian’s Code)

• Justinian’s most lasting contribution;

• Roman law after centuries was a mass of laws passed by the Senate and assemblies, legal commentaries of jurists, decisions of praetors, edicts of emperors, ...

• Justinian was well trained in Imperial government and Roman law – desired to codify and simplify the mass of legal materials;

• The basis of imperial law in the Empire until its end; written in Latin; basis of the legal system of all of continental Europe;
Justinian’s Code

• A systematic compilation of imperial edicts – Corpus Iuris Civilis (Body of Civil Law)
• Digest – compendium of writings of Roman jurists;
• Institutes – summary of the principles of Roman Law; served as textbook;
• Novels – most important new edicts issued during Justinian’s reign;
Justinian’s Building Program

A series of riots had destroyed much of Constantinople; Justinian rebuilt much of the city giving it the appearance it would maintain for almost 900 years;

- **Enormous defensive wall** to protect the capital on the land side;

- Immense palace complex;

- Huge arena known as the **Hippodrome**;

- Hundreds of churches

- Roads, bridges, walls public baths, law courts, colossal underground reservoirs for city’s water supply, hospitals, schools, monasteries

- Greatest achievement was **Hagia Sophia** - the magnificent Church of the Holy Wisdom
Church of the Holy Wisdom

• Enormous dome which seemed to be floating in space; “as though suspended from heaven by a golden chain;”

• 42 windows around the base of the dome, which allowed an incredible play of light within the cathedral;
Hagia Sophia
Hagia Sophia
Hagia Sophia
Hagia Sophia
The Hippodrome

• Huge amphitheater constructed of brick covered by marble;
• Held 60,000 spectators
• Early Byzantine empire still gladiator fights;
• Main events were chariot races; 24 in one day; Constantinopolitans were passionate fans;
Hippodrome in Constantinople
Problems

After Justinian died,
• Distant territory to protect;
• Drained treasury;
• Smaller population after devastating plague;
• Renewed threats to frontiers;
Threats:

• Persistent attacks from Persians in east and Slavs in the North a threat;
• Empire combines civil governor and military commander roles in different territories; increased militarization of the empire;
• Rise of Islam: the most serious challenge;
The Byzantines successfully defend against Islamic attacks for centuries; the Islamic frontier in southern Asia Minor; Long-standing tradition of military strategy and tactics; also Greek Fire (petroleum-based compound containing quicklime and sulfur) – equivalent of modern flamethrowers – fired from tubes on ships against enemy ships;
Byzantine Empire Diminishes in Size

Under persistent attacks over centuries, Byzantines reduced to an eastern Mediterranean state;
Iconoclasm

Internal struggle over the appropriateness of sacred images depicting Jesus and the saints;

Forbidden in Judaism and Islam;

Orthodox Church affirms Jesus can be depicted because of the fundamental truth of Christianity, the Incarnation – God became man, took on a human body;
Sacred Images
Emperor

• Portrayed as chosen by God;
• Crowned in elaborate sacred ceremonies;
• Subjects expected to prostrate themselves in his presence;
• Sophisticated and elaborate court rituals;
• Power was absolute
• Ruling class – civil servants and high churchmen; well educated; this strong bureaucracy was a basic feature of the Empire;
Permanent War Economy

• State regulation of economic affairs; the survival of the Empire depended on careful maintenance of economic resources and the maintenance of the army;
• Encouraged agricultural production, regulate guilds, industries, manufacturing and commerce (trade);
• Government monopolies on grain and silk;
• Armies well trained and equipped with the latest weapons;
• Preference for diplomacy over rather than fighting;
• Masters of diplomacy – complex and crafty in negotiations – the word byzantine in English denotes crafty, sneaky, complicated, intricate;
Intellectual Life

• Greatly influenced by the traditions of classical Greece and Rome;
• Scholars preserved the works of the ancient Greeks;
• Imitated classical models;
• Large body of literature
• Historical works
• Religious works – theological treatises, lives of saints, beautiful sacred hymns and poetry;
• Books on military tactics;
• Photius the Great – the most learned man of the Middle Ages
The Importance of Trade

• Constantinople the largest city in Europe in the Middle Ages;
• until the 12th century, Europe’s greatest commercial center;
• located at center of trade between east and west; the basis for the city’s fabulous prosperity;
• Highly desired in Europe: silk, spices, jewelry, ivory; wheat and furs from Russia;
• Byzantine imperial monopoly on silk production; (silkworms smuggled from China);
• Important: upper classes not discouraged from making money through trade and manufacturing;