The Last Emperor

Five and a half centuries ago, on Tuesday, 29 May 1453, a Turkish army stormed and captured Constantinople after laying siege to the city for six harrowing weeks. The last Byzantine Emperor of Constantinople died in desperate fighting near the city walls. Constantine Palaiologos had already told his friends and advisors that he had no wish to survive the conquest of his capital city: a loss which marked the end of a civilisation which had endured for over eleven hundred years.

Known to history as Byzantium, this civilisation was in fact a remnant of the eastern, Greek speaking half of the Roman Empire.

The Empire of New Rome

The use of the phrase 'Roman Empire' is likely to conjure up images of white marble columns, laurel wreaths and pagan temples, Anthony and Cleopatra or, perhaps, sword and sandal epics like Gladiator. We are used to thinking of that Roman world as Western European and Latin speaking and, as any number of books or CD-Rom encyclopaedias will tell you, that world came to an official end in 476AD with the deposition of the last Emperor in the West.

In fact by the four hundreds, the Roman Empire's most important territory existed in the eastern Mediterranean. Centered upon Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey) this half of the Empire survived the fall of the West to forge a distinct identity. Greek speaking and Orthodox Christian, citizens of this Empire continued to call themselves Romaioi or "Romans" although later historians identify their civilisation as Byzantium, after the original name of Constantinople.

Constantinople: Queen of Cities

Constantinople itself tended to overawe visitors from other lands. Protected by a triple line of fortifications, the city's population grew to more than half a million people, considerably larger than all other major European urban centres combined.

Formally established in 330AD, Constantinople possessed at various times piped water supply and sewage system, hospitals with surgical, maternity and psychiatric wards, old peoples' homes and public baths. Constantinople's workshops and markets produced a variety of prestige and luxury goods, including silks, perfumes and jewellery, whilst the City's trade routes extended as far as China, North Africa and Scandinavia.
The City's focal point, the Great Church of Hagia Sophia, built between 532 and 537, stands today as a monument to faith and engineering skill. Crowned by a shallow dome suspended 56 metres high, Hagia Sophia is in certain respects a scale model of the Byzantine universe: a vast and mysterious inner space which demands humility and a sense of wonder.

Able to play the role of a superpower for over seven hundred years, Byzantium retained a level of cultural and social refinement far in advance of anything else in medieval Europe and more comparable with the great Islamic civilisations of North Africa and the Middle East.

Byzantium was able to maintain a literate population, a well organised central government, and a monetary economy. The Byzantine gold coin, the Nomisma, was the international currency of its day; recognised from India to Spain and trusted for its stability.

Byzantine diplomatic and cultural influence spread across south eastern Europe, to Italy, to Russia and also to the Middle East. The Byzantines' diplomatic skill, and a preference for avoiding full scale warfare wherever possible, earned them a reputation in Western Europe as limp wristed double dealers, to be scorned in preference for the supposed simplicity and moral superiority of the feudal west.

This difference in approach was drastically exposed when the two competing sister civilisations of medieval Europe; the Latin speaking Catholic west, and Byzantium, the Greek speaking Orthodox east, came into violent face to face contact during the Crusades.

Despite a constant level of conflict with their Arab and Turkish neighbours, the Byzantines had never fully developed the concept of holy war and recognised Islamic rulers as cultural equals. Byzantine attitudes were incomprehensible to the Crusaders, who were resentful of Byzantine cultural superiority and who furthermore suspected the Byzantines of treachery against the rest of the Christian world. In return, the Byzantines treated most westerners with condescension and failed to fully appreciate the threat they posed to Byzantium.

**Decline and Fall**

Finally, in 1204, Byzantium's wealth proved an irresistible lure to a large Crusading army diverted from its original objective in Egypt. These soldiers of Christ attacked and partially destroyed Constantinople, the preeminent city of the Christian world. Massive numbers of books, irreplaceable art works and holy relics were destroyed or stolen by the Crusaders, who congratulated themselves upon having taught the untrustworthy Greeks a lesson.

Constantinople never recovered from the shock of the Crusaders' attack and the Byzantine government found itself unable to counter a growing threat from the Ottoman Turks.
The Turks were based in Asia Minor, but by the 1300s had crossed over into eastern Europe. Confident and dynamic, the Ottomans soon controlled large sections of south eastern Europe and had reduced Byzantine control to the Peloponnese, in Greece, and Constantinople itself.

By 1453 Constantinople's population had shrunk to a fraction of its former size and much of the city lay in ruins. An Ottoman army of more than 80,000 men finally overwhelmed the city's defenders and began Constantinople's immediate conversion to a Turkish city. Hagia Sophia became a mosque, and remained so until another conversion to a museum in the 1930s. Inspired by Hagia Sophia, Turkish Sultans adorned their new capital with impressive new mosques, the domed silhouettes of which are a distinctive feature of Istanbul's skyline today.

The Byzantine Inheritance

The rest of Europe proceeded to forget about Byzantium. Even today the Byzantine role in maintaining an unbroken line of civilisation throughout Europe's "dark ages" is minimised: a legacy of 18th and 19th Century historians who treated Byzantium as pale and unworthy reflection of Imperial Rome.

In fact a huge and until recently unrecognised cultural debt is owed to Byzantium for its role in preserving the legacy of Classical Greece; which in turn contributed to the Italian Renaissance and the cultural and scientific development of modern Europe.

But the Byzantine inheritance also stands on its own terms, particularly in the fields of law, diplomacy, historiography, architecture, religion and, especially, in art. Abstract and intense, Byzantine religious art closely reflects the Byzantine self image: spiritual, melancholic and compassionate.

Meet the People: Imperial Court and Aristocracy

The Byzantine Empire was an autocracy: In principle the Emperor maintained complete control over all branches of government, finance and administration, the judiciary and armed forces, as well as wielding enormous influence over the Orthodox church and the financial life of the empire.

The office of Emperor (known by the Greek word for 'King': Basileus) was inviolable, no Byzantine ever seriously thought about any other form of government until the Empire's last days. But there was a very real difference between theories about the Basileus in general and the actual position of individual emperors. Byzantium continued with the Roman idea of an elective monarchy: Emperors were subject to the Empire's laws and even the Emperor Justinian I, an arch-autocrat, recognised in his legal codes that the people had in fact simply transferred their sovereignty to the Emperor - he did not rule in his own right.
Although several families managed to establish ruling dynasties, Byzantium did not fully develop the notion of hereditary rule. Many able and ambitious men (and at least one woman) from very humble beginnings managed to rise to the top over those who had a 'better' claim in terms of their family background. The Byzantine idea that the Emperor was ultimately selected by God also, perversely, helped successful rebels and usurpers: If you were able to depose the existing Emperor and rule in his place you obviously had God's approval - otherwise He would never have allowed you to succeed.

The God-Protected Empire

The adoption of Christianity as the Roman state religion in the 4th Century AD transformed both the Empire and the Christian Church.

Christians were no longer members of a minority sect, persecuted with varying degrees of enthusiasm by Roman authorities. Instead they found themselves the subject of official favour. The Emperor Constantine I was convinced the Christian god had promoted him in his rise to power and was determined to ensure on-going divine protection for his empire.

Constantine ensured that the interests of Church and State were closely identified with each other, in a symbiotic relationship that remained a defining characteristic of the Byzantine Empire. The church received numerous legal and financial dispensations and was permitted to play an active role in the Byzantine political and administrative framework. In return the Church was able to confer spiritual authority upon the Emperor and his government: No longer regarded as a demi-God himself, as in the old pagan Empire, the Emperor instead became God’s chosen representative on earth, guiding his people according to divine will.

The special metaphysical status of Byzantium, as part of of God’s overall design for humanity, was a vital component of the ideological glue which held the Empire together, sometimes in the face of extreme adversity. The special status of Christianity in the Empire also placed a premium upon the importance of "right" belief. Byzantines passionately debated the dual, human and divine, nature of Christ, the procession of the Holy Spirit, the status of religious icons as objects of devotion or worship, or whether it was possible achieve direct communion with God through meditation. Beginning with the Council of Nicaea, Ecumenical Church Councils were convened to pronounce upon such matters of religious controversy. Orthodoxy was defined according to the decisions and religious formulations made by these councils.

The Orthodox Church imitated early the organisation of the secular Empire. The Patriarch of Constantinople was the Church’s formal leader. He was also quite literally the Emperor’s next door neighbour - the Patriarchal residence was situated near the Great Palace. Throughout the Empire every provincial city or town possessed a bishop who was ultimately answerable to the Patriarch and who ran an administrative and judicial framework which paralleled the state bureaucracy.

Significant numbers of Byzantine men and women became monks and nuns, either as a lifetime vocation, as a retirement option, or as a sometimes forced refuge from political disgrace. Monasteries became powerful institutions in their own right, with significant land holdings and
social prestige. Leading monks, such as Theodore of Studios, were sometimes able to organise resistance against the Imperial Government on political or religious matters. Although Byzantium maintained a strong secular educational tradition, some monks and nuns were also noted for their devotion to learning - monasteries maintained "Scriptoria", where skilled writers and copyists produced books, the most precious of all medieval commodities.

From a late twentieth-century perspective it is difficult to fully understand the pervasive influence of religion upon the Byzantine thought-world. Byzantines did not conceive of God and the supernatural world as something remote or unreal: the reality of God and His intercessors, Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Archangels, the Saints, was taken for granted and readily assimilated by even the most worldly and rational members of Byzantine society. Byzantine religious devotion consequently placed a premium upon direct personal contact with the supernatural world and possessed a mystical, meditative quality that set it apart from Western forms of worship.
In A.D. 528 the Emperor Justinian began a review of the old Roman laws. There were thousands of Roman laws that ordered life in the empire. The emperor chose ten men to review 1,600 books full of Roman Law and create a simpler legal code. These men were able to create the Justinian Code with just over 4,000 laws.

Book I, Of Persons

VIII. Slaves

1. Slaves are in the power of masters, a power derived from the law of nations: for among all nations it may be remarked that masters have the power of life and death over their slaves, and that everything acquired by the slave is acquired for the master.

Book II, Of Things

I. Division of Things

28. If the wheat of Titius is mixed with yours, when this takes place by mutual consent, the mixed heap belongs to you in common because each body, that is, each grain, which before was the property of one or other of you, has by your mutual consent been made your common property; but, if the intermixture were accidental, or made by Titius without your consent, the mixed wheat does not then belong to you both in common; because the grains still remain distinct, and retain their proper substance. ...if either of you keep the whole quantity of mixed wheat, the other has a real actio [claim or suit] for the amount of wheat belonging to him, but it is in the province of the judge to estimate the quality of the wheat belonging to each.