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# Byzantines

Averil Cameron

Blackwell
Publishing

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148–5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia



First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Cameron, Averil.
The Byzantines / Averil Cameron.
p. cm. – (The peoples of Europe)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-631-20262-2 (hardback : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-631-20262-5 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Byzantine Empire—History. I. Title. II. Series.

DF552.C36 2006
949.5′02—dc22

2006004744

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12pt Sabon
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Singapore
by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:
www.blackwellpublishing.com

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# Preface

## Byzantium – an Absence

For most historians, Byzantium is an absence.

A few examples will suffice. To take intellectual history first: in the volume entitled *Medieval Philosophy*, the second volume of *A New History of Western Philosophy* published by Oxford University Press in 2005, we read that from about AD 600 'philosophy went into hibernation for two centuries'.[1] Hibernation might imply an awakening, but whatever awakening there may have been is simply ignored in the rest of the book. Another example can found in the debate about nations and nationalism. Some, like Anthony D. Smith, have argued against the prevailing view that nations and nationalism are the children of modernity, and have debated the question of whether there were nations in antiquity.[2] But while the discussion of possible earlier examples includes ancient Egypt, classical Greece, Edom, Arpad, Aram and Armenia,[3] Byzantium is nowhere to be found. Two recent books on the end of the Roman empire do no more than briefly allude to the fact that the Roman empire in the east did not 'fall' but continued until the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453.[4] A study of Eurasia in the eleventh century CE from a 'world-historical' perspective does no more than remark that even some specialists on Byzantium have been asking themselves why its reform and renaissance in the eleventh century were 'so much less thorough-going than their Latin counterparts'.[5] Finally – and by now it is no surprise – Byzantium is also absent from discussions of the rise of the (Western) individual,[6] while in an interesting collection of responses to a recent work on Mediterranean history, with a long time-span extending to AD 1000, the only entry for Byzantium in the index is to a passage in which the Byzantine empire appears only in passing, albeit in a paper in which Byzantium does at least have a role. In the same book, in a general map labelled 'The Mediterranean in

Greek, Roman and medieval times', 'Byzantium' seems to be used as the name for the city of Constantinople, which is not itself labelled.[7]

Byzantium therefore occupies an uncertain place in historiography, which is to say no-one knows what to do with it. Was it part of Europe? Or does it belong rather to the East? How does the history of Orthodoxy sit with the conception of Western Christendom?[8] (The contemporary relevance of this question is amply demonstrated by its recent and explicit evocation by some member states of the European Union.) Another point of uncertainty is the role of Byzantium in the Crusades, somehow poised between the Latin West and the Saracen East. This is despite the fact that, like its successor empire, that of the Ottomans, the territory of Byzantium included large swathes of Europe, where its influence after 1453 has continued until today. Moreover, as an integral factor in the political and cultural histories of the emerging post-Communist states of central and eastern Europe, Byzantium has acquired a newly sensitive role, both as the predecessor of the Ottoman empire and the bringer and guarantee of Orthodox Christianity, and as conveying an uneasily 'Eastern' inheritance.

These ambivalences make the inclusion of Byzantium in this series, and its re-insertion into the history of Europe and of the wider Mediterranean world especially necessary, at a time when the extent and nature of Europe are again urgent questions, and when the relation of the 'West' with the Islamic world is a matter of tension and anxiety. Unlike the barbarian groups who settled in the territories of the late Roman empire, and whose identity and ethnogenesis are currently the subject of much debate,[9] the Byzantines were not a people who arrived from the north or the steppes and found their identity through interaction with the Romans. It is a moot point when one can first call them Byzantines, rather than Romans (as they continued to refer to themselves), and indeed the term 'Byzantine', used in this sense, is an innovation of the sixteenth century. Edward Gibbon referred to seven centuries of a 'Greek empire' after the age of Justinian, and was unsure whether Justinian himself should properly be assigned to the Roman empire or to this Greek successor. But the Byzantines themselves were deeply involved in the ethnogenesis of other peoples, including the Bulgarians, the Serbs, the Hungarians and the Russians. Byzantium, no less than Rome or the papacy, shaped the development of Europe.

In the often partial and, from the western European point of view, rather insular, historiography of Byzantium, certain powerful narratives have held the field. These include the idea of Byzantium as an overwhelmingly Orthodox society, dominated by an alliance between Church

and emperor sometimes described as Caesaropapism, in which the emperor was able to, and often did, intervene by *diktat* in the affairs of the church. Closely connected with the narrative of Byzantium as an overwhelmingly religious society is the idea that it was static and even fossilised, dominated by a stifling court ritual. In land-holding and economic relations the theme of 'Byzantine feudalism' dominated older scholarship and features in books that are still very widely read. Finally, the Gibbonian image of Byzantium as the weak successor of the Roman empire is in danger of being reinforced from two new directions. First, the reinvention and relabelling of the period from roughly the fourth to the seventh or even the eighth centuries AD as 'late antiquity', and the very positive evaluation placed on it in much recent scholarship, invite us to question the evaluation of Byzantium as either late antiquity's extension or its contrast. Secondly, while on the one hand crusader historiography is at last permitting some degree of recognition of the Byzantine involvement, the evaluation of Byzantium in the Comnenian period from the late eleventh century, one of the greatest periods in its history, now has to contend with a competing narrative of an energetic, developing and expanding western Europe, characterised by the rise of towns and universities and the development of self-consciousness.[10] In this context, the awareness among historians of the approaching catastrophe of the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204, and still more of the difficulties of the succeeding period up to 1453, make adverse comparison between Byzantium and western Europe all too tempting. We need here to ask how far any of these narratives of Byzantium will still stand, and if not, how they should be replaced.

Writing accessibly about Byzantium presents many challenges. One must in the first place attempt to overcome the prejudice that still exists against the eastern empire and the stereotypes with which it is surrounded. In addition, not only is the subject matter unfamiliar, but the written material that the historian needs to use is often difficult to find and exists only in editions in obscure publications and difficult languages. This situation has improved greatly in recent years with the appearance of an increasing number of English translations, and these are used wherever possible in this book. But some important Byzantine source material is still not edited and exists only in manuscript form, and a great deal more has to be read in old and uncritical editions. Writing about a society from which so few archives or official documents have survived also requires techniques of imagination and analysis very different from those familiar to modern historians. Byzantinists employ quantitative methods when they can, but given the nature of the sources this can only

be done with great care, and much more often they must draw on comparative material or use other theoretical tools in order to interpret their evidence.[11] Finally, the Byzantines are unlike most of the other 'peoples' in the present series, not only because they were not a 'people' in the ethnic sense, but also in that their state lasted for many centuries, during which it underwent many changes even while retaining some of its most salient characteristics. The transition from the ancient to the medieval world is again a major topic of historical attention with Peter Brown and others on the side of a 'long' late antiquity, stretching to c.AD 800, or even, in some formulations, to AD 1000. Where Byzantium fits in such a model is not easy to decide, but I have chosen to begin with the key moment of the inauguration of the city of Constantinople by Constantine the Great in AD 330, and to attempt to convey something of the changing characteristics of Byzantium throughout its long history until the capture of the city by the Ottomans in 1453. It is impossible in this compass to deal in detail with all the aspects that might be included, or to provide a detailed narrative history, which in any case is available in other publications. But it was, after all, the city of Constantinople, seat of the imperial power for eleven centuries, with only a short break from 1204 to 1261, that constituted the very centre of Byzantine identity.

In writing for non-specialists as well as for Byzantinists, my aim has been to ask questions rather than to overwhelm the reader with detail; however, Chapters 2 and 3 provide an outline chronological narrative – in which less attention is paid to the late antique or early Byzantine period than to the later centuries – that I hope will give a context for the thematic discussion in the rest of the book. There are real problems of scale and coverage: Byzantine history is complicated, with many unfamiliar peoples and places so that even the thematic chapters must contain some narrative, while, equally, much has necessarily to be omitted. A central theme, however, is reception. The Byzantines still suffer from being thought of as obscure, or indeed obscurantist (hence the ubiquitous appearance of the term 'byzantine' to denote unnecessary complexity). I believe that the Byzantines need to be brought into the mainstream and Byzantium needs to be normalised as a subject for historians. There are, however, distinct problems for the historian of Byzantium. For example, while the amount of written source material is very large most of it is literary or theological and emanates from the educated elite, and historians need to work hard if they want to uncover the everyday, or the average Byzantine to whom Norman Baynes referred as 'the man in the East Roman street'. Documentary evidence is much

smaller in volume than literary material, since no state archives survived the sack of Constantinople, and the historian has to resort to ecclesiastical or local records where they exist, or the archives of other states such as Venice or to the documents preserved in literary sources or occasionally in manuscripts. Many thousands of lead seals survive that were once attached to official documents and that carry information about the officials who issued them, from which deductions can be made about wider economic or administrative practice, but while these are now being seriously studied and published their interpretation is a highly specialised matter. As for archaeological evidence, while there has been an explosion of archaeological work dealing with the late antique or early Byzantine period, and this has dramatically changed the way historians view that period, the same level of archaeological interest has not yet been felt in relation to later periods of Byzantine history.[12] In contrast, the current trend for a contextualised or historicist approach among Byzantine art historians, in clear reaction to the earlier concentration on style, is making a major contribution to knowledge; this is particularly welcome, in view of the fact that a disproportionate amount of work has been done in the past on ecclesiastical buildings, especially from an architectural and stylistic viewpoint.

A book of this kind cannot be, and does not try to be, a history of Byzantium. In any case, several historical introductions to Byzantium have recently been published in English, and because of these and other easily available reference tools the subject is now becoming much more accessible. My treatment has had to be highly selective, and readers will find that many important aspects of the subject, or series of events, are either omitted or referred to only briefly. Nor can the references do more than indicate some of the key sources and modern literature, mostly in English; this will not satisfy specialist readers, but I hope that the references will be helpful to others and act as pointers to further reading.

# Acknowledgements

This is a book in a well-established series, and I am grateful for the chance to include Byzantium. Blackwell is also the publisher of the series The Making of Europe, which contains several distinguished studies that either have direct relevance for Byzantium, such as Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom*, or that, like R. I. Moore's *The First European Revolution* or Jacques Le Goff's *The Birth of Europe*, provoke a Byzantinist to respond. I must also thank those persons and institutions that have given me the opportunity and the challenge to broaden my interests to embrace the Byzantine empire. They include my students both at King's College London when I taught Byzantine history there after the foundation of the Centre for Hellenic Studies in 1989 and at Oxford after I became Warden of Keble College in 1994. Keble has given me two periods of research leave, in Athens and at Princeton, during which I have worked on this book, and I am very grateful to the College and to colleagues in both places, especially Evangelos Chrysos and Niki Tsironis, and to the British School of Archaeology in Athens, as well as to Peter Brown and Dimitri Gondicas of the Program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton. It was an especial pleasure to spend time in the company of Peter Brown, who has been a support and an inspiration for many years. John Haldon was a generous friend during my stay at Princeton, and I owe a great deal also, in Princeton and elsewhere, to Emmanuel Papoutsakis, Petre Guran, Glen Bowersock, Philip Rousseau, Alice-Mary Talbot, Natalia Teteriatnikov and the group of Princeton graduate students, including Daniel Schwartz and David Michelson, with whom I enjoyed regular encounters over coffee or in Firestone Library. I should also like to thank a number of other colleagues and friends for their help in different ways including Jean-Claude Cheynet, Michael Jeffreys, Tim Jenkinson, Tassos Papacostas, James Pettifer, Trish Long, Anne Dude and Joseph Wang. I am also grateful to the editors of the series, James Campbell and Barrie Cunliffe, and to the production and

editorial staff at Blackwell, especially Tessa Harvey, Angela Cohen and Gillian Kane. Felicity Marsh was an exceptionally helpful and intelligent copy-editor. Finally, I am very conscious indeed of the debt I owe to the many other colleagues, friends and family, who have encouraged me to persist.

Averil Cameron
Oxford, January 2006

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ACO | *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, ed. E. Schwartz (Berlin, 1914–40), J. Straub (1971), R. Riedinger, series secunda (Berlin, 1984–92) |
| CFHB | Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae |
| CCSG | Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca (Turnhout) |
| CSCO | Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Louvain) |
| CFHB | Corpus Fontium Historicorum Byzantinorum |
| CSHB | Corpus Scriptorum Historicorum Byzantinorum |
| Mansi | J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, 31 vols. (Florence and Venice, 1759–98) (still the standard edition for council acts and proceedings, though gradually being superseded by new critical editions) |
| MGH | Monumenta Germaniae Historica |
| PBE | *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire, Vol. I* AD *641–867*, ed. J. Martindale (Aldershot, 2001, CD-rom) |
| PG | J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus,* Series Graeca (Paris, 1857–66) (the fundamental publication of Byzantine writings, with Latin translation, but often based on much older editions) |
| PLP | *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, ed. E. Trapp et al. (Vienna, 1976–96) |
| PLRE | J. R. Martindale, ed., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Vol. III* AD 527–640 (Cambridge, 1992) |
| PmbZ | *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*, ed. R.-J. Lilie and F. Winkelmann, 7 vols. (Berlin, 1998–2002) |
| TIB | *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, vols. 1–9, various authors, Denkschr. d Österr. Akad. d. Wiss., phil-hist. Kl., Vienna, 1976– |

# 1

# What was Byzantium?

> 'Hellene' is the glory of ancient Greece; 'Romaic' the splendours and the sorrows of Byzantium, above all the sorrows. 'Hellenism' is symbolized by the columns of the Parthenon; Byzantium, the imperial golden age of Christian Greece, by the great dome of St Sophia.
>
> Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece*

Byzantium is the modern name given to the state and society ruled almost continuously from Constantinople (modern Istanbul) from the dedication of the city by the Emperor Constantine in AD 330 until its sack by the Ottomans under the young Mehmed II ('the Conqueror') in 1453. But Byzantium is hard to grasp, and 'the Byzantines' even more so. Even the seemingly innocuous statement in the first sentence raises several questions. For example, how significant was the supposed separation of the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire in AD 395? Did Byzantium begin with the reign of Constantine the Great (proclaimed emperor at York, 25 July AD 306), or with the dedication of Constantinople (AD 330) or later, perhaps in the sixth century or the seventh? Was Byzantium a society, a state or an empire? What were its geographical limits at any one period? And, above all, who were its inhabitants, how were they defined and how did they think of themselves? Byzantine high culture used Greek as its medium, and the language of the state was always Greek. But while the title of this book implies that the Byzantines were a distinct people, the inhabitants of the empire were defined neither by language or ethnicity, but by their belonging to the Byzantine state, and during much of the period by their Orthodox Christianity. They called themselves 'Romans', or at times, simply 'Christians'. The nature of their state, and the role played in it by Orthodoxy, are both fundamental questions addressed in this book. But before approaching either of them we need to address some problems of definition, and these are the subject of this first chapter.

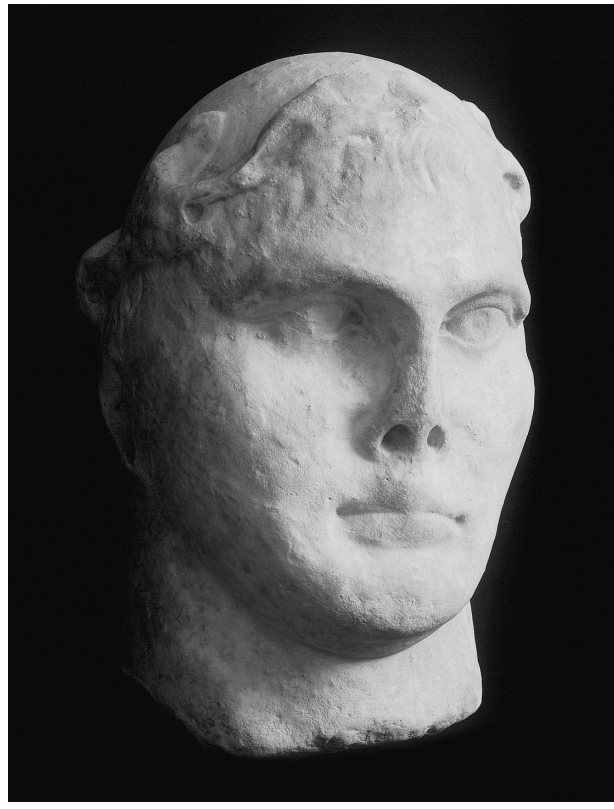

**Fig. 1** Head found at York, probably of Constantine, York Museums Trust (Yorkshire Museum)

It is essential to grasp the changing size and shape of the Byzantine state through the eleven centuries of its existence (for I shall here take the dedication of Constantinople in 330 as a conventional beginning). No state could possibly stay the same for so long, and the history of Byzantium is a history, in part, of sheer staying power in the midst of substantial historical change. There is a real problem about defining and assessing this Janus-like society which looked in different directions during its history – across the Mediterranean; to the east, towards what we now call Turkey and the Middle East; to the west towards Sicily and Italy, towards central and eastern Europe and the Balkans and to the north towards Russia. Different 'units of analysis' will be needed at different times, and mapping the Byzantine Empire calls for

a series of different maps for different stages in its history. Furthermore, the world around Byzantium was dramatically transformed during this long period: territory was conquered and lost again, empires and dynasties rose and fell, the ancient world gave way to the medieval, Islam became a great power and the later centuries saw the vigorous expansion of western Europe. No single definition or characterization of Byzantium or the Byzantines could do justice to all of this, and part of the aim of this book is to draw attention to the sheer pace of historical change.

## Attitudes to Byzantium

Why study Byzantium? Even now, to most Europeans, apart from Greeks and others of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the very word, Byzantium, suggests something exotic and (probably) bureaucratic and even corrupt. According to the *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, the term 'Byzantine' denotes something that is 'a) extremely complicated, b) inflexible, or c) carried on by underhand means'. An anthropological work about the Nupe of Nigeria based on field work done in the 1930s used the title *A Black Byzantium*, apparently to denote hierarchy, social stratification and complexity.[1] To describe oneself in ordinary conversation as a Byzantine historian provokes incomprehension or disbelief. In the western European popular consciousness mention of Byzantium attracts two main responses: either it is still thought of as irrelevant and backward, the precursor of the Ottoman Empire and somehow implicated in the religious and political problems of the contemporary Balkans, or else it seems in some mysterious way powerfully attractive,[2] associated as it is with icons and spirituality or with the revival of religion in post-Communist Europe. Each of these responses reveals the persistence of deep-rooted stereotypes and neither does justice to Byzantium or the Byzantines as they actually existed. There is also a great difference between the perceptions of the Byzantines held by the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox worlds, corresponding to the degree to which Byzantium does or does not belong to national histories. This presents an even greater challenge to historians than before, in view of the political changes that have taken place since the late twentieth century.

Why then is it that historians seem unable to avoid looking back on the long centuries of the Byzantine state except with the consciousness of eventual fall? This is not how most people think of the classical Greek city states or even of imperial Rome. Yet the idea of Byzantium still goes hand in hand with an acute awareness of the Ottoman sack of

Constantinople in 1453.[3] Mindful of Edward Gibbon and many other writers since, the one thing we think we know is that the Byzantines were doomed. In this familiar scenario the tiny population of Palaiologan Constantinople heroically and tragically held out to the last; the fragment that remained of the once great empire was surrounded and could never have prevailed. Many books still talk of the decline that is assumed to have set in during the Palaiologan period from 1261 to 1453, forgetting that this final phase in the empire's history had opened, in the return of the exiled emperor to Constantinople, with a success, and had gone on to produce some of the most brilliant cultural artefacts in Byzantium's history. The difficulties that Byzantium experienced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were to a great degree the result of dramatic historical developments in the world around it. Yet Byzantium's Western critics are still wont to claim that its future did not lie in a Western-style renaissance leading to a European Enlightenment. Its destiny, they maintain, was to be engulfed by the Turks, the ancestors of the proverbial sick man of Europe and the representatives of the East. It was Byzantine scholars and churchmen who carried Greek manuscripts and Greek learning to Italy and made possible the development of Greek humanism in the West. Yet the poignancy of the last days of Constantinople and the singing of the last liturgy in Hagia Sophia on the eve of the final assault on 29 May 1453 have, in much of the most influential scholarship on Byzantium, forever branded the last Byzantines with the stigma of romantic failure.[4]

An important aim of this book is to demonstrate the inadequacy of these assumptions. As I have suggested, part of the difficulty in the past has been connected with the way in which Byzantium has been studied and by whom. Not only is the inaccessibility of many of the voluminous literary and theological writings of the Byzantines themselves a serious problem for contemporary students, but the scholarly study of Byzantium also requires linguistic and other skills nowadays in short supply. There is a notable tradition of philological research and publication in patristics (the study of the Fathers of the Church), and of the broader study of Byzantium in such European centres as Paris and Vienna, and the study of Byzantium has flourished in modern Greece and the Orthodox world. The subject had a distinguished history in pre-revolutionary Russia, and a predictably ambivalent one in the Soviet period, from which it is now emerging.[5] But in Britain, while a few major scholars such as Steven Runciman have made Byzantium their special field,[6] its history has never been part of the general curriculum either in schools or universities, nor has it generally been seen as playing more than a

peripheral role in European history. It was not, for example, held to be central in the planning of a five-year research programme on the transformation of the Roman world between AD 400 and AD 900, sponsored during the 1990s by the European Science Foundation.

The situation has changed in the past few decades, particularly under the influence of the re-emergence in eastern Europe since 1989 of national states with a stake in rediscovering their own history and the concomitant questioning of the concept of 'Europe'. Under these influences we are seeing a contemporary effort to present Byzantium as a 'world civilisation' on a par with any other.[7] There has also been a distinct rise in the number of scholars working on Byzantium both in Britain and in North America, many of whom have not themselves had the classical training shared by most Byzantinists in the past. This marks an important change, for while in the past writers in the English-speaking world such as J. B. Bury and many other historians, and Robert Byron and Patrick Leigh Fermor among travel writers, saw Byzantium through a classicist's eyes,[8] their successors today are far more likely to approach it as a medieval society in its own right.

## How and When Did 'Byzantium' Begin?

A complicating factor during the last generation has been the explosion of interest in the period now often referred to as 'late antiquity', which reaches from roughly the third to at least the seventh century AD.[9] A whole discipline has grown up around the idea of late antiquity as an identifiable field of study in its own right, vested in the concept of a united, or at least shared, Mediterranean culture, and a continuity up to the eighth century or even later, as suggested by the use by some archaeologists of the term 'the long classical millenium' to refer to the period from the fourth century BC to the eighth century AD. The very success of this changed perspective blurs the question of a transition from classical to Byzantine, and calls into question the date from which Byzantium can be said to have come into being. However the issues of periodisation, as well as the 'transition' from the ancient world to the medieval, or Byzantine one, have been endlessly debated both before and after this recent development, and are not susceptible of any final answer. Some would place the real beginning of Byzantium as late as the seventh century when much of the territory stretching from Anatolia to Egypt and North Africa was lost as a result of the Arab invasions, and when the urban landscape of Asia Minor underwent sharp contraction.

Others, more conventionally, date the beginnings of Byzantium from the foundation of Constantinople on the site of the classical city of Byzantion by the Emperor Constantine. Logical though this seems, it has the twin disadvantages of suggesting that there was somehow a distinct Byzantine or eastern empire at a time when the Roman empire was not yet formally divided, and of assuming that in the first phase of its existence the city of Constantinople marked much more of a departure than most scholars are now willing to admit.[10] A third option might be to start from the reign of Justinian (AD 527–65), which indeed seemed pivotal to Edward Gibbon, while recent archaeological work might suggest a break in the late sixth.

All these options have their merits, but choosing to begin from the reign of Constantine has the advantage of recognising the symbolic importance that his foundation of Constantinople came to play in Byzantine consciousness. This does not imply separation between the eastern and western empires in this early period, or any drastic change of attitude on the part of the citizens of the east. Unlike most empires, the Byzantine Empire did not grow out of conquest. Rather, it evolved from an existing political system that had itself developed from the 'high empire' of Augustus and his successors.[11] New settlers in fourth-century Constantinople were not immigrants from outside: they came from within the existing territories of the Roman Empire. This makes the change from Roman Empire to Byzantium both difficult and challenging for historians to trace.

## 'Greeks' and 'Romans'

Constantine's city (Constantinople, 'the city of Constantine') occupied the site of the classical Greek city of Byzantion, whence the term 'Byzantine' and our use of 'Byzantium', but the citizens of the eastern Empire referred to themselves as 'Romans'. From this came the term *Rum*, used for the Byzantine empire in Arabic and Turkish sources, and *Rumis* for the Greek Christian population under the Ottomans. Similarly, *Romios* was used to denote a Greek until, with the development of the modern Greek state, it came to be replaced by 'Hellene'. Though Greek was, and continued to be, the language of Byzantine government and culture a large part of the population at many periods of the empire's history spoke other languages. This was certainly true in the early period when the empire included Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia, whose languages included Coptic, Aramaic and Syriac, as well as

Latin-speaking North Africa, Italy and Illyricum. The Byzantine success in driving the Vandals from Carthage and North Africa in AD 533–4 led to the introduction of some Greek for official purposes until Carthage eventually fell to the Arabs in 696. At times in later periods large areas of the Balkans came under Byzantine authority, and places formerly under Arab rule were recovered, with the result that the empire included Slavs and Bulgarians on its European side and Muslim populations in the east. 'By the eighth century, versions of Slavonic appear to have been spoken throughout much of central Europe east of the Elbe',[12] and some of these regions, with their existing populations, later came for periods under Byzantine rule. Latin, Italian and Hebrew also coexisted with Greek. There were also other changes: in the Comnenian period (1081–1204) 'Hellene' begins to be used as a self-description, and a character in one of the twelfth-century romances is identified as 'a Greek [Hellene] from Cyprus',[13] while in the last phase of the Byzantine state the term 'Hellene' came back into use in conscious evocation of Byzantium's classical heritage. In earlier periods, in contrast, the term 'Hellene' denoted pagan ideas or persons, and for the Christian Byzantines it carried very negative connotations. Plato, for example, was considered a 'Hellene', and his philosophy was condemned by the Church, and saints' lives, especially from the early period, are full of improving tales of the discomfiture of pagans ('Hellenes') by Christian holy men and women; similarly, collections of miracle stories contain anecdotes demonstrating the triumph of Christian healing over 'Hellenic' medicine. When the Emperor Justinian collected and codified the law in the sixth century it was Roman law in Latin that his team of lawyers made available to the Latin west and which became the basis of several European law codes.[14] Justinian's Code also remained the basis of law in Byzantium, although after this mammoth task of codification, completed in a very few years at the start of his reign, Justinian began to issue some of his new laws (*Novels*) in Greek. There were Latin-speakers in Constantinople in the sixth century, among them the emperor himself, as well as North African bishops and exiles from the war in Italy who included Cassiodorus, quaestor and praetorian prefect under the Ostrogothic kings of Italy and the author of the *Variae*, a collection of official correspondence, a *Chronicle,* a *Gothic History* and later the *Institutiones*, written for his monastery at Vivarium in Italy. But Greek had already been in use for centuries as the standard official language in the eastern Empire outside the specialised fields of law and the army; the future pope Gregory the Great was a Latin-speaker in Constantinople in the 580s, but from the end of the sixth century the use of Latin declined to

the point where few were familiar with it, and there was little desire to master Latin or to read Latin texts until much later. The works of Augustine, so fundamental for the medieval West, went unread in Byzantium.

However the question of Greek in Byzantium is not straightforward. Already in the early period a gulf had opened up between the written, high-style language and the spoken one. Those with literary aspirations adopted a formal, rhetorical style using classical vocabulary far removed both from the spoken language and that used in literary works of a more practical and less ambitious nature.[15] As late as the fourteenth century writers aimed at a linguistic register and a literary style that was as close as possible to classical models. Thus imitation or *mimesis*, an explicit aim in Byzantine rhetoric, has commonly taken to be a hallmark, or even the sum, of Byzantine cultural expression.[16] The use of this 'high' linguistic and stylistic register is one of the most characteristic features of Byzantine literature and has done more than anything else to convey an impression of artificiality and sameness. In fact it is not so very different from the divide in recent times in modern Greek between *katharevousa* ('pure') and demotic ('popular'). Linguistically, at least, Byzantium was a multicultural state and its emphasis on language rather than ethnicity as the badge of culture followed a Roman precedent of toleration. The modern nation-state lay in the future, and racial prejudice as such was not a feature of Byzantine culture;[17] Byzantine prejudice existed in plenty, but it was directed in other ways.[18]

## Who Were the 'Byzantines'?

The Byzantines were not a 'people' in any ethnic sense. If we consider only Anatolia, the population had been thoroughly mixed for many centuries.[19] Nor did an education in classicising Greek, such as was normal for Christians and pagans alike when Constantinople was founded, and which continued to be the badge of culture in Byzantium, carry any ethnic implications.[20] In this sense advancement in Byzantium was open to anyone with the means to acquire the education in the first place and the necessary connections. This was an inheritance from the Roman Empire, which included Asia Minor and the other territory which came to be ruled from Constantinople. By the early third century AD there was no longer any formal distinction in the empire between citizens and the non-citizens who formed the population of conquered or assimilated provinces; what mattered was not ethnicity or local background

but shared culture, connections and status. In the eastern part of the empire there was also an inheritance from even earlier conquests and earlier regimes, those of Alexander the Great and the successor states that were set up after his death, whose enduring legacy was to spread urban culture and the Greek language to the east. Byzantium did not therefore emerge out of an ethnic grouping or in a region occupied by a population with a particular ethnic background but developed its own characteristics out of and in response to centuries of earlier history and settlement. One of the features that it took over from this background was a willingness to incorporate those who were willing to adapt to its norms, including using Greek as the language of culture.

With these beginnings, the Byzantine Empire also underwent a striking degree of expansion and contraction during its history. The tenth-century treatise of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus on the administration of the empire vividly underlines the extent of Slav settlement and population change in the Balkans in the early medieval period, and the Byzantine state contributed to this mixing from an early stage by moving populations, sometimes for strategic reasons though more often in order to resolve demographic or security problems. Thus, the Emperor Justinian II (685–95, 705–11) settled Slavs in Asia Minor and moved easterners to the Balkans. When Constantinople became severely depopulated in the eighth century, Constantine V (741–75) repopulated it from outside, and also moved people from the east to Thrace. Nikephoros I (802–11) moved soldiers and their families from Asia Minor to Thrace and repopulated Lakedaimon with settlers from the Armeniakon, Thrakesion and Cibyrrheotikon themes, and Basil I (867–86) moved defeated Paulicians from Anatolia to the Balkans. Population change and the spontaneous or enforced movements of peoples accelerated with the military campaigns in the east in the tenth and eleventh centuries with their corresponding changes in political and religious control. Both Muslim and Christian populations fled from approaching armies while yet others were deported, among them Muslims from cities such as Adana, Mopsuestia in Cilicia, Antioch and Emesa (Homs in Syria) to Byzantine territory and non-Muslims into empty lands. The capture of large numbers of prisoners might lead to enslavement and sale or ransom, or to deportation, and conversion was a further possible result of changes brought by military conquest. Later still, it was convenient for the despots of the Morea in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to take advantage of Albanian emigration into Greece to use them as settlers in the Peloponnese.[21] The population shifts of the nineteenth-century Balkans and the 'ethnic cleansing' of more recent times therefore

had precedents in the Byzantine Empire over many centuries, even if with different motivation and scale, and these shifts in population were important in continuing the assimilationist characteristics that Byzantium had inherited from its Roman roots.

We refer to Byzantium as an empire, because it had an emperor (*basileus*), and quite often more than one, and because at most periods of its history it governed other peoples and territories by reason of conquest. Yet the extent to which Byzantium was a territorial state, or was perceived as such by the Byzantines themselves, is far less clear. There are no surviving Byzantine maps; the image of the world envisaged by the sixth-century writer known as Cosmas Indicopleustes is based on biblical cosmology and was designed to show the superiority of Scripture over Ptolemy's *Geography*. The latter continued to be studied, at least in later periods, but most of the Byzantine wars of conquest, or indeed defence, must, like Roman ones, have been undertaken without detailed mapping and on the basis of local guides. Modern maps of the Byzantine Empire in its various stages run the risk of imposing a clarity that was not felt or even envisaged by contemporaries, and this is especially true in relation to the lines on modern maps which represent 'frontiers'.[22] The art of war itself was highly developed in Byzantium, and numerous military treatises survive.[23] In the period from Constantine to Justinian frontiers in some parts of the empires were marked by fortresses, and both Anastasius (491–518) and Justinian (527–65) devoted a great deal of resources and much energy to repairing and rebuilding them. Procopius's *Buildings*, probably written in 554, is a panegyrical account of Justinian's building activity with a strong focus on military installations and churches, and while, as a panegyric, it is tendentious of its very nature, it can sometimes be used with care as a guide to actual sites. However, Justinian's work on fortification at the isthmus of Corinth in Greece did not keep out the Huns in 559, and Slavs penetrated Greece and the islands in the late sixth century and attacked Thessalonike in the early seventh; their presence throughout the Balkans in this period is undoubted, though it is often hard to trace.

The eastern frontier, and in particular the military aims of late Roman emperors, have been the subject of much recent debate. It seems clear that the number of soldiers in the frontier forts had been reduced in the sixth century, and that a retreat had taken place from some parts of the frontier area.[24] For the defence of this region Justinian relied heavily on 'Saracen' (that is, Arab) allied troops. It was not a matter of linear fortifications even in areas where there were legionary forts, and the *strata Diocletiana* from north-east Arabia and Damascus to Palmyra

**Fig. 2** Part of the walls at Dyrrachium (Durres, Albania), birthplace of the Emperor Anastasius (AD 491–518)

and the Euphrates was a military road, not a fortified line. The 'frontiers' of the early Byzantine period were very different from the closed and policed borders of modern states, and in later periods of Byzantine history the notion of a frontier was even more fluid; there was also a high degree of regional variation. We should think rather in terms of broad frontier zones that were zones of contact rather than of exclusion: there was no standing army stationed along fixed boundaries. This permeability was at its most pronounced in Anatolia and the east where for several centuries Christian and Muslim populations were fought over and intermingled; these borderlands form the background, however distant, to the romance of Digenes Akrites, whose father was an Arab emir and whose mother was the daughter of a Byzantine *strategos* in Cappadocia.[25]

Nor should the lines drawn on even the best modern maps of the Byzantine Empire in its various stages be taken to imply that when conquests or reconquests happened there was an immediate imposition of state apparatus over a whole area; the Byzantine state was mainly interested in the exaction of revenues, and law enforcement was extremely variable; security consisted largely of using military force to repel

or diplomacy to make deals with predatory neighbours or potential invaders. Diplomacy was very important in Byzantine foreign relations, and the Byzantines liked to think of themselves as heading a family of nations, an idea which led Dimitri Obolensky to use the term 'commonwealth' for the Byzantine system.[26] It may now be necessary to revise that rather benign picture, for Byzantium was certainly capable of aggressive wars. Yet trade and religion carried Byzantine influence as far as China, and at certain phases in its history Byzantium's sphere of influence did indeed stretch far enough in all directions to make the Byzantines' own term, the *oikoumene*, or 'inhabited world', appear convincing.

This empire was held together by a strong ideology based on its court and capital at Constantinople. This ideology revolved round two axes: the imperial power and the Orthodox religion. Each was in practice flexible, and their interrelationship was far from fixed. The empire was also defined by the state's capacity to tax and to operate military and legal systems. To this extent Byzantium was, and remained, a centralised state, at least until 1204, even though the physical limits of its control varied very greatly from one period to another.

## Change and Byzantine Identity

Officially, and in the minds of its elite, the Byzantine Empire remained the centre of the civilised world, protected by God. So strong was this idea that during the seventh century when it was under threat, and even after its eastern provinces had been brought within Umayyad rule, the powerful idea of a universal God-protected empire was restated by provincials who had themselves become the subjects of the Caliph.[27] Constantine VII's tenth-century handbook for his son, *On the Administration of the Empire*, set out for the latter's benefit a description of all the peoples (*ethne*) with which Byzantium, which he calls 'The Empire of the Romans', might have dealings. During the Palaiologan period the ecumenical posture expressed here was no longer credible (though it was still stated), and Byzantine foreign policy relied at all periods on an elaborately developed diplomacy that was very likely to involve concessions and had as its object the procurement of benefits. Even now, however, it drew on long traditions, and, in the circumstances, as Nicholas Oikonomides observed, it was remarkably successful.[28] In the Comnenian period, from the eleventh century and later, the Byzantines were also renowned for other kinds of alliance, such as dynastic

marriages, even though Constantine VII had claimed that the practice had been forbidden by Constantine I.[29] Again, they demonstrated flexibility in the face of changing circumstances.

## Minorities and Social Cohesion

Whatever the immediate conditions, for much of the history of the Byzantine Empire political coherence was less a matter of policing fixed frontiers than of finding ways by which to hold the allegiance of populations that were often highly varied. How this was achieved in military and economic terms will be considered later. There were, however, other mechanisms of assimilation and integration. As we have noted, Byzantium was from the start polyglot and cosmopolitan. It was also centralised, in that the legal system was based on imperially issued legislation, and provincial governors and officials were centrally appointed. This was reinforced by the ecclesiastical structures, and by the sixth century, if not before, bishops had become key players in their local communities;[30] we can see this in action from numerous saints' lives, such as the early-seventh century *Life* of Theodore of Sykeon. However, the imperial system of Byzantium was also able to allow considerable local freedom and variety. In late antique Syria and Mesopotamia, for example, a lively local culture existed, using Syriac as its written language and developing through the fifth and sixth centuries an identity based on the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon (451). This rejection was not indeed universal, yet it was enough to give Eastern Christians a coherence which stood them in good stead in the seventh century and later under Islamic rule. To the north-west of Constantinople, Slavs and Avars invaded the Balkans in the sixth and seventh centuries, and this occupation was followed in the late seventh century by that of the Bulgars. Here, however complex and varied Byzantium's relations with both groups in subsequent years proved to be, they were accompanied by processes of acculturation in both directions, and Byzantine cultural influence was also felt further afield in the later states of Croatia, Serbia, Russia and Wallachia and Moldavia.[31] Another group were the Jews, who are known to us partly through unsympathetic Christian sources, but also from the documents from the Cairo Genizah, dating from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, which reveal active and well-established links between Jewish families and communities across the Mediterranean whose language was Hebrew. In later periods many westerners came to live within the empire, both in Constantinople and elsewhere, some from the