THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

SOCIETY

The emperor of the Byzantine empire was seen as Christ's representative on earth. But surrounded by would-be usurpers and assassins, no incompetent emperor stayed around long. Of the 88 emperors from Constantine I to Constantine XI, 13 left to go to monasteries, while 30 others died violently--starved, poisoned, blinded, bludgeoned, strangled, stabbed, dismembered, or decapitated. The skull of Nicephorus I ended up as a silver-lined goblet from which Khan Krum of the Bulgars toasted his boyars (nobles).

The empire had a double society--the society of Constantinople and the society of the provinces. During the classical age of Byzantine power from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, the city of Constantinople had a population of between 500,000 to 800,000 people, divided into three classes, the bureaucrats, the commercial class, and the poor.

The government was highly organized. It rigidly controlled all commerce through guilds that restricted profits and regulated trade. Government controlled prices, wages, and rents. It stockpiled wheat to offset poor harvests. It checked weights and measures, inspected shops, ledgers, and qualities of merchandise. Hoarders, smugglers, defrauders, counterfeiters, and tax evaders faced severe punishment. Justinian set a limit on interest charged at 8 percent. Insurance and credit services were developed. The gold solidus, a type of coin introduced by Constantine, held its value for seven centuries.

Anyone who corrupted a woman employed in the imperial textile factories was fined two pounds of gold. Anyone who committed incest, homicide, or who privately made or sold purple cloth (reserved for royalty), or taught shipbuilding to state enemies could be decapitated, impaled, hanged, or drowned in a sack with a hog, cock, viper, or an ape. The grocer who made dishonest measures lost a hand. Arsonists were burned. During the later centuries of Byzantine history mutilation grew in favor as a punishment--slitting a nose or cutting out a tongue--as a humane substitute for the death penalty. Contractors had to replace faulty construction at their own cost. Housing codes forbade balconies less than ten feet from the facing house, storing noxious matter, or encroaching on a neighbor's light or sea view.

The emperor, the church, and the leading citizens ran an extensive program of charities. The city was filled with hospitals and charitable organizations of various kinds, which impressed foreign visitors very much. The poor were, in effect, a professional class, and there were even companies of beggars foreign visitors very much. The poor were, in effect, a professional class, and there were even companies of beggars professional class, and there were even companies of beggars.

Street lights made the nights safer. Passports were required for travel in frontier districts. Taverns closed at eight p.m.

INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY:

In 330 AD the Roman emperor Constantine, believing that the city of Rome was in physical and social decline, established a new capital at the old Greek city of Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople. It is strategically located on a peninsula at the mouth of the Bosphorus Straits (The Bosphorus Straits are the water bridge between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara which itself opens up into the Mediterranean). Because it is surrounded on three sides by water and because of its wonderful city walls it was almost impregnably defensible. In 390 the Roman emperor Theodosius divided the Roman empire between his two sons, making them co-emperors. One of those sons was located in Rome and the other one at Constantinople. This arrangement of co-emperors with one in the east and one in the west lasted for the next 86 years. However, the collapse of the western part of Roman Empire in 476 left only the eastern part of the empire intact. It saw itself as the continuation of the Roman empire. To distinguish it from the earlier Roman empire, which was often different in character, modern historians have called it the Byzantine Empire. It was, like some of the nations of Europe, another of the successor states that grew from the original Roman empire. The Byzantine Empire existed from its inception (330 if dated from Constantine or 476 if dated from the fall of Rome) until finally conquered in 1453 by the Ottoman Turks.

During the fifth century, increasing numbers of hellenized (to hellenize is to accept or promote Greek culture) Egyptians and Syrians came to Constantinople. Under Rome they had been excluded from imperial administration. In the East, many began to serve in government institutions. Constantinople became not just the capital of the East, but its cultural center as well.

The new turn to eastern ways affected the Christian religion within the Byzantine Empire. The populations of the eastern provinces, though mostly Christianized, kept their ancient traditions alive in a number of unorthodox theologies. Because the emperors needed to preserve unity in the empire they treated the religious groups leniently, for the most part, and even sought to reconcile their ideas to the creeds of the ecumenical councils. The Roman popes often protested against these compromises and came to stand for conservatism in the church. Eventually the Christian church split along eastern and western lines in 1054, being known today respectively as the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches.

Throughout its 1000-year history the Byzantine empire was continually threatened by many different groups, particularly the Persians, and then the Arabs on the east and in the Mediterranean and the Bulgarians in the north and west. Finally, the Ottoman Turks succeeded in a siege of Constantinople and the Byzantine empire came to an end. One of the principle differences between the late Roman and Byzantine empires was that the Roman empire was run by a military Latin government and bureaucracy, while the Byzantine was civilian and Greek. The Hellenistic culture of the East reemerged in Byzantium.
The plan of the following history is to take a brief look at the reigns of some of the Byzantine emperors in hopes of gaining a fundamental appreciation for the Byzantine empire and its role in European history.

IN THE BEGINNING

The situation in Constantinople at the time of the fall of Rome was that the emperor Zeno (474-475, 476-491) had been momentarily deposed. His mother-in-law, Aelia Verina, the widow of the former emperor Leo I, had tricked him into fleeing the city in the belief that his life was in danger. She wanted her lover to be emperor. However, Verina's desires were not fulfilled. Instead her brother, Basilicus, (475-476) was proclaimed emperor.

Basilicus created resentment and lost supporters almost immediately. He lost Aelia’s favor when he had her lover assassinated. He caused great religious controversy when he tried to abolish the position of Patriarch of Constantinople (today the most respected position in Eastern Orthodoxy) and when he avidly supported the Monophysite position (the belief that Jesus did not have a human nature, only a divine one). Because of the unrest that Basilicus created, certain important men went to Zeno to help plot his return. In retaliation, Basilicus sent an army, led by his foppish nephew Harmatius, against Zeno and his supporters. (Harmatius used to dress up as Achilles and parade around the Hippodrome.) Zeno induced Harmatius into coming over to his side with bribery and returned unopposed to Constantinople. He locked Basilicus and his family up in a dried up reservoir, where they starved to death.

Between 483 and 488 Zeno spent much of his time putting down a rebellion led by Illus, the ally who had helped him regain the throne from Basilicus. One of the reasons Zeno finally won was the help he received from the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric.

In 487 or 488, Theodoric of the Ostrogoths (a Germanic tribe) made an agreement with Zeno that he would lead his people into Italy, overthrow Odovacar (the new German ruler of Rome), and rule Italy as an Ostrogothic kingdom. In 488 Theodoric began the move with his people into Italy. By 493 he had signed a truce with Odovacar. Both leaders agreed to rule Italy jointly and share the royal palace at Ravenna. A short while later, Theodoric invited Odovacar, his son, and others to a banquet in his part of the palace. When Odovacar sat down to eat, Theodoric cut him in half—from shoulder to thigh—with his sword. He had his son executed. He then ruled Italy, alone, as viceroy for the emperor in Constantinople from 493-526 A.D.

Zeno had solved the attacks on his empire by the Ostrogoths by making them his allies and having them rule Italy. The other major controversy of his reign, the Monophysite issue (the religious belief that stated Jesus had one divine nature and no human nature), remained unsolved when he died in 491.

The next emperor Anastasius (491-518) refused the demands of the Roman popes to condemn and destroy the various Christian sects that flourished in the East. In fact, Anastasius was so avidly Monophysite that he banished two patriarchs over the issue. Before Anastasius died he decided to name a successor. However, he felt that he needed a sign to help him choose. He invited his three nephews to a banquet. Under one of the three pillows where they would sit he had placed a parchment with the word “Regnum.” Whoever chose that pillow would be the emperor. Unfortunately for him, two of the nephews were friendlier with each other than they should have been. They chose the same pillow and no one picked the right one. Anastasius vowed that the first person to come into his chamber the next morning would be emperor. It was Justin, Commander of the Excubitors.

Anastasius, monetarily frugal, left a full treasury and an efficient civil service for the new emperor.

Justin (518-527) was an uneducated and illiterate Thracian peasant. His wife had been a slave, the concubine of the man Justin had bought her from. Justin was completely Orthodox, and well liked by the army.

Justin’s nephew, Justinian, (r. 527-565) was a reformer who pursued the goal of restoring the Empire to its former glory. He was educated at Constantinople by court bureaucrats and was thoroughly Byzantinized. He married an ex-prostitute Theodora. Together they launched a decade of cultural and political revival.

One of Justinian’s greatest accomplishments was the production of a comprehensive law code called, Corpus Iuris Civilis (the Body of the Civil Law). This sophisticated legal system streamlined the complicated massive legal system that had built up during centuries of Roman rule.

Another accomplishment was rebuilding Constantinople. In 532 city riots, led by Hippodrome clubs (two groups of chariot race drivers), destroyed the city. Originally the clubs organized the games in the stadium, but in the 480’s emperor Zeno had armed them out of fear of an attack by the Ostrogoths. Angered by the oppressing fiscal policies of the government they now led mobs in looting and burning the city. Apparently, Justinian wanted to flee but Theodora talked him into staying. The rebellion collapsed. Justinian built baths, aqueducts and cisterns, new government buildings, and 25 churches, including the magnificent St. Sophia (now known as Hagia Sophia). Its dome rises 180 feet above the pavement.

Justinian was mostly successful in his many military campaigns, and greatly expanded the empire. Among these conquests was part of Italy. It required twenty years of fighting for him to reconquer Italy from the Ostrogoths after the death of their king, Theodoric. Ravenna was the empire’s capital city in Italy.

Although Justinian had been militarily successful, his conquests and wars had, by the time of his death in 565, bankrupted the treasury. The next few decades would see the Byzantine world greatly reduced in size and strength. From the outside, conquests by Persians, Slavs, and Avars (the Avars came out of Mongolia) reduced the Empire to Constantinople in the East and in the West to the North African provinces, Sicily, marshlands around Ravenna and Rome, and some parts of southern Italy. Within the empire, unwise policies by the emperors caused various disturbances and problems.
Justin II (565-578) not only had problems dealing with the Lombards in Italy, the Avars in Dalmatia (western part of Yugoslavia), and Persia in the east, but he began a persecution of the Monophysites--an action always guaranteed to cause unrest. Justin II went insane before he died.

Tiberius II Constantine (578-582) was very popular because he stopped the persecution of the Monophysites, strengthened the army, reduced taxes by 1/4, and gave away thousands of pounds of gold. By the time he finally died after eating poison in a dish of mulberries, the treasury was in worse shape than ever.

Maurice (582-602) ruled competently. Among other things he improved the government of the provinces. But he had no money in his treasury to work with and therefore could not provide enough circuses for the entertainment of the people. He was not well liked. Another of his problems was that he did not treat his army well enough. For instance, he did not have enough money to ransom 12,000 prisoners taken from his army by the Avars in 599. The soldiers were all executed. Finally, when Maurice ordered that his army should stay out in the field in the winter of 602 rather than come home, the soldiers rebelled against him and raised Phocas to the emperorship.

Phocas (r. 602-10) was debauched, cruel, and drunken. Until Phocas torture in the empire had been relatively rare in the empire. He introduced the rack, blindings, and mutilations to the empire as new techniques of torture. Executions and murders were common. When the Persians attacked in 603 the empire's best general, Narses, refused to fight for Phoca. Instead, he joined in the attack with the Persians. Phocas lured Narses to Constantinople to discuss peace terms by promising him safety. When he arrived, Phocas had him burned alive. Over the next four years the Persians made tremendous gains in Byzantine property in the East, as did the Slavs and Avars in the West. The empire continued its downward slide which had begun after Justinian, reaching the lowest point it would face for centuries under Phocas. Fortunately, for the empire a government official in Carthage, named Heraclius, raised a rebellion and was able to place his son, also named Heraclius, on the throne as emperor. The emperor Heraclius had Phocas executed.

THE HERACLIAN DYNASTY

Heraclius (610-641) was one of the greatest of Byzantine emperors. However, he inherited great problems. His empire was besieged on all sides. The Avars and Slavs had overrun the Balkans in the west. The Persians had conquered the empire all the way to Chalcedon, just across the Bosphorus (the narrow neck of water that connects the Black Sea and the Mediterranean) from Constantinople, and had taken Antioch, Damascus, and Jerusalem. To add insult to injury the Persians had burned the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other shrines in Jerusalem and taken the True Cross and other holy relics back to Persia. By the year 614 the situation looked desperate. But Heraclius was equal to the challenge. He had worked from the beginning of his reign to strengthen his armies. He had also shored up the finances.

In 622 Heraclius established a peace treaty with the Avars that left him free to deal with the Persians. He led his armies himself into battle--the first emperor to do so since Theodosius the Great--and showed great courage and skill. By 628 he had marched to the Persian capital and defeated their king. Heraclius had saved and rebuilt the empire, reestablishing control in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. He brought the True Cross home to the altar of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. If he had died then he would have known only success. But the latter part of his reign saw two crises: the Moslems and Monothelitism.

In 629 Heraclius had marched off to Jerusalem to return the True Cross to the Holy City. He spent the next seven years organizing the eastern provinces of his empire. During this time the Patriarch of Constantinople, Sergius, decided to put forth the doctrine of Monothelitism (the belief that Christ had two natures but only one divine energy) in an attempt to unite the orthodox and Monophysite communities of the empire. Heraclius strongly supported Sergius's new formula, but it encountered huge opposition elsewhere.

In the meantime, the Moslem armies had begun their conquests of land in 633. (By 663 they would conquer Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Armenia, Persia, Afghanistan, and most of the northwest part of India known as the Punjab). In 636 they moved to conquer Jerusalem. By 638 they had succeeded. The Moslem Caliph Omar rode into Jerusalem on a snow-white camel.

Heraclius returned to Constantinople with the True Cross, tired and ill with dropsy. He had also developed a terror for the sea. He crossed the Bosphorus to enter the city only after a bridge of boats had been built across it and covered with branches so he could ride his horse on it without seeing the water. His mind was affected. The rumors were that God was angry with him because he had married his niece, Martina, after his first wife had died in 612. Now he no longer had the strength to resist Martina in her demands that their son, Heraclonas, be named as his successor. In 638 this declaration was made. In 641 Pope John IV condemned the doctrine of Monothelitism, adding insult to a tired, shamed, dying emperor. Within days, on Feb. 11, 641, Heraclius died.

In spite of his discouraging end, Heraclius had done much. He had saved the Byzantine Empire and made it, because of its renewed strength, the heart of Christendom during the seventh century. In fact, during this period a large portion of the clergy of Christianity were Greek-speaking (For instance, the first archbishop of Canterbury in England, Theodore of Tarsus 669-690, was an eastern churchman.) Heraclius established a dynasty. And for better or worse, he as much as anybody formalized the growing metamorphosis of the empire from Roman to Byzantine by decreeing that Greek, not Latin, was the official language of the empire.

When Heraclius died, his wife Martina, who had never been very popular, asserted her desire to maintain influence, if not full power, in the operations of the empire. Eventually, the growing demonstrations of the people against Martina caused the 11-year old grandson of Heraclius to be crowned as the emperor Constans II (641-668). A few months later Martina and Heraclonas were arrested. Her tongue was cut out and his nose was slit and they were both exiled to the island of Rhodes.
The first part of the reign of Constans II saw continuing losses of land to the Moslems. However, in 656 the Caliph Othman was assassinated. Two men were appointed as rival caliphs, Ali in Arabia and Muawiya in Syria. The division in Islam continued until Ali was assassinated in 661, leaving Muawiya as Caliph. The dissensions in Islam at this time brought some relief from Moslem military excursions to the Byzantine empire.

The Monothelite controversy was still a problem, however. In 647 Pope Theodore I excommunicated Patriarch Paul of Constantinople on this issue. Constans II decreed that everyone must simply drop the issue. He decreed that bishops who continued to discuss the issue would be deposed and ordinary citizens would be flogged and banished. But the subject would not go away. In 649 Pope Martin I summoned a church council and condemned Monothelitism. Constans had the pope arrested and brought to Constantinople. Martin was imprisoned, beaten, and banished.

Constans also saw problems in the west and decided to leave Constantinople and establish his capital there. Some thought it was because he wanted to escape terrifying visions of the brother he had murdered earlier, but it was probably to protect his Italian properties. He went to Rome in 663. There he stripped the city of remaining valuables—including the copper on the roof of the Pantheon (the Roman temple dedicated to all the gods)—and shipped it back to Constantinople. Soon he left for Sicily where he stayed for the next five years. In 668 one of his Greek attendants killed him by hitting him with a soap dish.

Constantine IV (668-685) faced a five year (674-679) siege of Constantinople by the Moslems under Muawiya. Moslem ships filled the seas around the peninsula. The secret Byzantine weapon, Greek fire, (a burning oil-based liquid flung onto the ships) finally helped convince the Moslems to go home. Constantine also proposed to the pope the Sixth Ecumenical Council of the church that was held at Constantinople in 680-681. This council condemned Monothelitism.

Justinian II (685-695, 705-711) was cruel and bloodthirsty. An example of his cruelty occurred after he had experienced early military successes. His victories were followed by the loss of all of Armenia when 20,000 of his Slavic soldiers deserted to the Moslem side. In retaliation, Justinian II had all the Slav families in Bithynia (northern Turkey), thousands of men, women, and children, slaughtered and dumped into the sea. His tax collectors used torture to collect taxes. Justinian eventually became so unpopular that a rebellion of the people overthrew him. His tongue was cut out, nose cut off, and he was exiled.

Leontius (695-698) also lost his nose in a mutiny of his army and was sent to a monastery.

Tiberius III (698-705) was overthrown by Justinian II who had come back from exile and reestablished himself as emperor with the help of the Bulgars (from the Danube delta area) king. Justinian had Tiberius and Leontius taken to the Hippodrome where the people pelted them with excrement before they were led away to be executed. Justinian then went on a binge of vengeance. He hung his brother, a very capable general, and his staff officers on a row of gallows; others he had tied in sacks and thrown into the sea; he had the Patriarch Callinicus blinded and exiled. In 709 he had all the dignitaries of Ravenna, Italy invited to a banquet. There they were chained, sent to Constantinople and put to death. In 711 in Cherson in the Crimea, Justinian II had seven leading citizens roasted to death and others drowned. This last episode finally led to a rebellion against him and his own execution. With his death the Heraclian dynasty came to an end.

THE DYNASTY OF LEO III

In the next six years Constantinople saw three emperors in quick succession and much confusion. Finally, a general, Leo the Isaurian, established himself as Leo III (r. 717-741) and founded a new dynasty. Leo won the throne with the help of the Moslems. He had made a deal with them that if they would support him, he would, once in power, concede to their territorial demands. However, after gaining the throne he turned on the Moslems. They besieged the city of Constantinople but suffered terrible losses and finally withdrew.

In 726 Leo destroyed the most prominent icon (a religious image) in the city: a picture of Christ in the porch of his palace. This destruction caused riots in Constantinople and some of the western parts of the Empire. In fact, the commander of the group that destroyed the icon was killed on the spot by a group of angry women.

The use of icons in the Greek Church was a natural development from the use of idols in the pagan Greek religion. The assimilation of Platonic thought into the Church between the second and fifth centuries had lent credibility to this practice. Plato had said that the contemplation of beautiful objects led one to the contemplation of beauty itself. The Hebrew and Moslem tradition ran contrary to this. Eastern monks, who were highly esteemed by the people, supported those who honored icons and opposed Leo's iconoclasm. The pope, Gregory II (r. 715-731) sided with the monks against the emperor.

In developing an argument for icons, the Monks argued for a separation of church and state. For this and other reasons, Leo saw opposition to iconoclasm (the destruction of sacred images) as an attack on his authority. In 730 he issued an edict prohibiting the use of icons. He ordered that all icons be destroyed. Hundred of Monks fled from the East to Greece and Italy, others to Cappadocia (central Turkey). In his decree he essentially asserted the idea of Caesaropapism, the belief that the Emperor was the representative of Christ on earth and had authority in religious affairs as well as the government. This theory contradicted the theory of papal authority but found precedence in the behavior of past emperors such as Constantine the Great. The emperor and the pope were once again at odds with each other. Leo III sent ships to Italy to arrest the pope, but he died before they arrived. The new pope, Gregory III, also opposed iconoclasm. In 731 Leo III took some lands away from the pope. Little is know of the last ten years of Leo’s reign. He died in 741 with an empire undoubtedly still deeply troubled over the question of icons.

Leo’s son, Constantine V (r. 741-775), developed a rationale for
iconoclasm. He cited early Christian writers like Eusebius who said that the divine is not describable. From this he argued that when a painter paints Christ, he paints either only the human form of God or both the human and divine. If the first, then the artist commits heresy by depicting Christ as only human. If the second, then he commits heresy by giving the divine a worldly, limiting, form. He said that the God-man Christ could only be represented in the sacrament of the Eucharist, when the bread and wine became his body and blood. The iconodules (those who argued for images in the church) called Constantine V, "Copyronymus," meaning "dung name." The champion of the iconodules was John of Damascus who said that when God became man it became possible to represent him in his incarnate form. In a council called and dominated by Constantine V in 754, these positions were adopted. Iconodules were excommunicated. Some were mutilated, others killed.

Constantine V was one of histories many unusual characters. He was a bisexual, filling his palace with young favorites. He was an accomplished harpist. Early in his reign, he faced a rebellion from his brother-in-law that he put down. His brother-in-law and his two sons were publicly blinded.

During Constantine's reign the Lombards captured Ravenna and then turned with greedy eyes toward Rome. Pope Zachary (r. 741-752) appealed to the empire for help, as had other popes in the past, but Constantine ignored the appeal. This denial of help had fateful consequences for European history. Unable to get help from the Byzantine emperor, the pope turned for help to a German tribe, the Franks. Pope Stephen II made an alliance with their leader, Pepin the Short in 753.

Constantine V was a fine general. He went on nine military campaigns against the Bulgars. He died on the way home from one of those campaigns.

When Constantine's V son, Leo IV (r. 775-780), died of disease he left a ten-year-old son and a beautiful wife, Irene. The young Constantine VI (r. 780-797) became emperor but real power passed to the empress, his mother. Exceptionally cruel, Irene (r. 780-802) had controlled the government during the five years of Leo IV's rule and she controlled things during the reign of her son. Irene was an iconodole. Under her guidance the government of the empire slowly softened on icons. In 787, a new council, summoned by Irene to Nicaea, reversed the decision on icons of 754 and adopted the theory of John of Damascus. The controversy was over in principle. In actuality iconoclasm had many supporters and the government would still have to occasionally deal with the controversy for another 100 years. Only then would the government begin to restore icons in the churches.

By 790 there were movements in the empire to make Constantine VI the real leader of the country. Irene was confined to her palace. In a series of stupid moves over the next seven years, Constantine VI lost his supporters. Irene eventually regained enough power to have him blinded in such a brutal manner that it killed him.

In the meantime, the relationship between East and West had not been good for some time. They deteriorated further when on Christmas day, 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans as he rose from kneeling at Mass. Charlemagne would not have wanted to feel obligated to the pope and was probably surprised by the coronation. It was a statement by the pope that he had the authority to crown the emperor. It was also an apparent attempt to resurrect the Roman empire in the West. The Byzantines felt this act threatened their authority. They saw this as an act of a barbarian who did not understand that the emperor lived in Constantinople. For their part, the West would not recognize a woman (Irene) as an emperor. Strange as the whole episode was, the situation did present itself with a unique opportunity to reunite East and West.

In 802 Charlemagne, as emperor in the west, proposed a marriage between himself and Irene, empress in the east. By this means all of Christianity would have been united politically once more. Irene was favorably disposed to the offer. She was terribly disliked by her subjects. The Arabs had been gaining new territory, as they would continue to do so during the first half of the ninth century. She had ruined the treasury by trying to win popularity though a decrease of taxes. She realized a coup was probably only a matter of time. Marriage to Charlemagne was a way out. She agreed to the wedding. Her subjects were horrified to think that she would marry someone they considered a barbarian. High officials in the government declared her deposed. One of them, her minister of finance, Nicephorus, became emperor himself. She was exiled to the island of Lesbos and died a year later.

THE END OF ICONOCLASM AND THE FIRST EAST-WEST SCHISM

Nicephorus (r. 802-811) used strong measures such as a state monopoly on loans of 17% to merchants and the undoing of Irene's tax exemptions to build the empire’s treasury. The emperor also spent much time fighting the Bulgars under their powerful leader, Krum. In 811 Nicephorus at the head of a huge army conducted a massacre of Bulgars in the city of Pliska. Two months later he led his army through a narrow gorge where it was slaughtered. Nicephorus was killed. Krum had his body impaled on a stake and his head cut off. Krum mounted his skull in silver and used it as his drinking cup for the rest of his life.

Michael I (r. 811-813). During the reign of Michael I the Byzantine empire negotiated a deal with Charlemagne who had earlier seized Venice to force the East to recognize him as emperor of the West. They reached a settlement in 813, the year before Charlemagne died. The settlement recognized Charlemagne as emperor of the Franks. Henceforth, there were two Christian empires, the Byzantine and the Holy Roman.

Michael I lost a battle with Krum because of treachery by a Byzantine commander named, Leo. Michael abdicated and became a monk. His three boys were castrated to prevent them from making a bid for power.

Leo V (r. 813-820) was the commander that betrayed Michael I. In 814 he reinstalled iconoclasm because of a groundswell of support from large numbers of dispossessed peoples (due to the
One of Leo’s close friends, an officer named Michael, began plotting against him. Upon discovery of the plot on Christmas Eve of 820, Michael was condemned to be thrown into the huge furnace that heated the baths of the palace. Leo’s wife persuaded him to wait until after Christmas so he would feel good about taking communion on Christmas. This gave time to Michael’s fellow conspirators to save him. They dressed as monks and attacked Leo at church, cutting off his arm as he defended himself and then his head. They drug the body around the hippodrome and then loaded it on a ship with his wife and four boys. The four boys were all castrated.

Michael II (820-829). Michael II spent a good part of his reign fighting wars and rebellions. But he was the first emperor in half a century to die peacefully in his bed.

Theophilus (r. 829-842) used to wander incognito in the streets of Constantinople, listening to the grievances of his people and investigating prices. He rode through the city once a week allowing the people to make their complaints. He lavishly transformed Constantinople, heightening and strengthening the walls and building beautiful buildings of marble and porphyry. In the palace he built a magnificent mechanical toy:

“An ambassador received here in audience would be astonished to find the imperial throne overshadowed by a golden plane tree, its branches full of jeweled birds--some of which appeared to have hopped off the tree and on to the throne itself. Around the trunk were lions and griffins couchant, also of gold. Still greater would be the visitor’s wondernent when, at a given signal, the animals would rise up, the lions would roar and all the birds would burst simultaneously into song. Suddenly the chorus would be interrupted by a peal of music from a golden organ, after which there would be silence to permit conversation. The moment the visitor rose to leave, the whole chorus would start up again and continue till he had left the chamber.” (A Short History of Byzantium, John Julius Norwich, New York: Knopf, 1997. P.136.)

Theophilus spent much of his time fighting the Moslems. He was an iconoclast but not one that was too strict. He was the last of the iconoclasts. He died of dysentery at the age of 38.

During the middle of the ninth century the imperial government was a shaky regency for Michael III (r. 842-867) who began his reign at the age of two. His mother, Theodora, was first regent. She began the process of restoring icons to the churches. Iconoclasm ended but with one concession made: Byzantine art restricted itself to two dimensions. Sculpture was set aside. Theodora and her advisor Theoctistus promulgated a decree banning a Christian sect called the Paulicians (They rejected images, baptism, marriage, Eucharist, the sign of the cross, the Old Testament, some of the New, and the church hierarchy.) The result was a military campaign against them and a massacre of 100,000 people.

In 856 Michael and his uncle Bardas pushed Theodora aside. Michael was weak and easily influenced. Bardas controlled the throne until 866. Bardas supported a Renaissance of classical studies. He refounded the secular university in Constantinople, which remained a center of education and culture for two centuries.

Since 847 the Patriarch of Constantinople had been Ignatius, one of the three castrated sons of the deposed emperor Michael I. He was a supporter of papal primacy. He was also a severe iconodule and immediately began punishing any remaining iconoclasts. The moderates of the church in Constantinople began looking for a way to depose Ignatius and replace him with a scholar and imperial official named Photius.

In the meantime, Bardas had fallen in love with his own daughter-in-law and abandoned his wife, causing a scandal in the city. Ignatius excommunicated Bardas and refused him communion. Bardas waited for a chance for revenge. It came when Michael decided to send his mother and unmarried sisters off to a convent. Ignatius refused to shave their heads and participate in their exile. Bardas used this refusal to convince the emperor that Ignatius was plotting against him with his mother. Michael exiled Ignatius and proclaimed Photius as patriarch.

In 858, Pope Nicholas I, investigated the way the new patriarch had come to power and came to oppose the nomination of Photius. During the investigation Pope Nicholas I suggested to Photius that he would recognize him as Patriarch if the lands that were taken from the pope by Leo III in 731 were returned. Photius replied that the emperor Michael could not do that.

As the argument continued Nicholas supported the theory of papal supremacy in the Church by using the Donation of Constantine. This document came into existence sometime in the first half of the ninth century. It claimed that Constantine the Great had donated Rome and the western half of the empire to Pope Sylvester I (r. 314-35) when he had moved his capital to Constantinople. This document was proved to be a forgery in 1440 but until then was used with success to support the idea of papal supremacy. Photius replied to the document with a learned rebuttal. In 863 a Lateran synod excommunicated Photius. In 867 a Byzantine synod excommunicated the pope. The two churches were in schism.

In the midst of the argument over Photius, in 864 Cyril and Methodius went on their missions to Moravia. Among other accomplishments, they established a Slavonic alphabet, paving the way for the literary developments of the Slavs.

By 866 Michael had reached his majority. But he drank heavily and caroused. Bardas was the real power behind the throne and had ruled successfully. However, one of Michael’s cronies had quickly risen in power. The Armenian Basil went from stable-boy up through the ranks until he held great influence over Michael. He married Michael’s mistress so that she could be introduced at the palace without scandal. Basil began to poison Michael’s mind against Bardas. In 866 Basil treacherously murdered Bardas in Michael’s presence. Basil became co-emperor with Michael. A year later he had Michael killed as he lay drunk in his bed.

As sole emperor Basil (r. 867-886) deposed Photius and restored Ignatius because he wanted the pope’s support in his quest to
Basil was a huge man. He established a dynasty and made an excellent start on one of the hallmarks of the Macedonian period, the reestablishment of the Empire's territory and military superiority against its enemies. He also introduced important government reforms, including the making of a new law code. Basil's reign was very successful. However, during the last seven years of his life he began to have bouts with insanity probably brought on by the premature death of his oldest son. He finally died in 886 at the age of 74, some say in a hunting accident though there is some possibility that it may have been assassinated by his son Leo.

Leo VI (r. 886-912) was highly educated and understood the seriousness of conflicts within the church. He made his younger brother, Stephen who was 15 at the time, patriarch, beginning a tradition of making the church a department of the state and an appendage of the imperial family. He was a good emperor, reorganizing the administration of the provinces and restructuring the armed forces. However, there was a religious crisis that revolved around him. Leo VI married four times, something forbidden as wicked by the Eastern church. His first wife, a religious fanatic who arose at night every hour so she could pray, had died as had his next two wives. Forbidden by the new patriarch of Constantinople, Nicholas, to marry a fourth time, Leo appealed to Pope Sergius III. The pope was more than happy to support the emperor since it helped advance his claim as the supreme bishop, the bishop to which such appeals were made. Nicholas was imprisoned and forced to abdicate as patriarch.

Leo's brother, Alexander (r. 912-913) was cruel, a drunk, grossly immoral, and a little strange. For example, he became convinced that the bronze statue of a boar at the Hippodrome was his "other" self. He refurbished the statue with new teeth and genitals in hopes of improving his own which he had worn out. Fortunately for the empire he died after 13 months on the throne.

Constantine VII (r. 913-959) was a boy when he became emperor and through most of his reign was dominated almost completely by his father-in-law, Romanus, who forced his way into being named co-emperor. In 945 Constantine VII became sole emperor. He was fine scholar and painter and an excellent emperor. He encouraged and patronized arts, literature, science, and crafts. He promoted a land reform that greatly increased the well-being of the peasantry and the economy. His reign is considered the highlight of the renaissance begun by Bardas and Photius.

Romanus II (959-963) was dominated by his beautiful wife Theophano. He died after only a short reign, but his reign was militarily very successful thanks to two brilliant generals, one of whom was named Nicephorus Phocas. After the death of Romanus, Theophano asked Nicephorus for protection and help for her sons. He willingly gave it and in the ensuing battle for supremacy with those who would usurp the throne, the generals of Nicephorus proclaimed him emperor.

Nicephorus II Phocas (963-969) married Theophano. He was short, barrel-chested, intelligent but narrow-minded, and extremely religious. He was not very cultured and made several diplomatic blunders, offending several of his allies as well as the eastern church. He also promoted crushing taxation to support his endless wars. In short, Nicephorus II was not well liked. To make matters worse, his wife Theophano fell in love with one of his old commanders, John I Tzimisces. Together they plotted and carried out Nicephorus's assassination. He was drug from his bed, killed and beheaded. His body was flung from the window into the snow below.

John I Tzimisces (969-976). The Patriarch of Constantinople refused to crown John until he had shipped Theophano off to a monastery and done penance for his predecessor's death. Having done so, he was crowned two weeks after the murder. John I was tremendously successful as emperor. He conquered the Russians, Bulgars, and Caliphs of Baghdad and Cairo. He regained for the empire most of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Palestine. He married his niece to the heir of the German throne, the future John II. He was handsome, courteous, compassionate with others (except for his predecessor), and courageous. But he was probably poisoned by his chamberlain Basil.

Basil II (r. 976-1025), son of Romanus II was considered the greatest of the Byzantine emperors. He never married, was an ascetic, cared nothing for learning, and was a military genius. He went to war year after year with the Bulgarians, at one time repatriating 14,000 of them, all of whom he had blinded. He pacified the Russians, negotiating a treaty in 989, according to which the Russian prince of Kiev, Vladimir, would convert to Christianity and in return receive in marriage Basil's sister, Anna (after the marriage Vladimir put away his other four wives and 800 concubines and occupied himself with trying to help convert his people). Around the turn of the century Basil II was successful in the east against the Arabs of Syria. He instituted social reforms, particularly land reforms, restoring small farms to the masses.

Basil's land reforms did not last much past his death. His heirs could not hold the throne. The great aristocratic families regained their lands.

The decline of the Byzantine empire begins with Basil's brother Constantine VIII (r. 1025-1028). When he fell ill in 1028 with no sons to succeed him, he forced a 60-year-old senator named Romanus, to divorce his wife and marry his daughter Zoe. She was almost 50.

Romanus III (1028-1034) was married to Zoe on Nov. 10, 1028. The next day Constantine VIII died. The next day Romanus was crowned emperor. Soon he cut Zoe off financially and took a mistress. Zoe herself became hopelessly infatuated with an epileptic teenager named Michael. Romanus drowned in the royal baths in 1034. Within a few hours Zoe forced the Patriarch Alexis to marry her and Michael.

Michael IV (1034-1041) soon assigned Zoe to the women's apartments and curtailed her spending worse than before. He
spent the rest of his life in religious pursuits. He also wisely administered the empire. Unfortunately, his health did not hold out and he died.

His successor was his brother-in-law’s son, Michael V (1041-1042). Michael V was of low birth. After he had been on the throne for four months, the people of Byzantium deposed him and insisted that Zoe be reinstated as empress and that her sister Theodora be brought back from a monastery and be made co-empress. Theodora had Michael V blinded. The two sisters reigned jointly in 1042. Zoe then married in order to stabilize the shaky government.

Zoe’s husband became Emperor Constantine IX (r. 1042-1055). It was a marriage of political convenience. Zoe even invited Constantine’s mistress back from exile to live in the palace. Constantine encouraged artists and scholars and there was a bit of a scholarly renaissance during his reign. However, he was not a responsible ruler. By the time of his death the empire was threatened on all sides. In particular the Normans had just about eliminated the Byzantine holdings in Italy. Worse yet, it was during Constantine’s reign that the final split, or what is considered the final split between the eastern and western churches took place in 1054.

In 1053 Pope Leo IX (r. 1049-1054) tried to stop the advance of the Normans in southern Italy. The patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, (r. 1043-1058), who already distrusted and disliked the pope, resented this interference in areas of southern Italy claimed by the Byzantines. In the same year he condemned certain practices of the western church such as the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist, fasting on Saturdays, and living in communion with the Jews. He shut down the Latin churches in Constantinople. The pope's advisor, Humbert of Silva Candida, acting in behalf of Pope Leo IX, prepared a ferocious rebuttal, arguing the case for the Roman primacy from the Donation of Constantine.

Because of the pressing military needs a reconciliation was soon urgently sought by both pope and emperor. Thus, in Jan. 1054, Leo sent an embassy to Constantinople, headed by Humbert. The mission was a disaster. The patriarch and the papal envoys immediately took offense with each other. Relations deteriorated until on July 16, 1054, in full view of the congregation of the great church of St. Sophia, Humbert placed on the altar a bull excommunicating the patriarch. Cerularius responded with his own excommunication of the pope on July 24. The final schism between the east and west is generally dated from this year, 1054.

Theodora reigned with quiet efficiency from 1055 to 1056. Michael VI (1056-1057) was overthrown by a military coup d'etat, aided by the patriarch Michael Cerularius. The military made their general Isaac Comnenus the new emperor.

THE DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE

Isaac Comnenus (1057-1059) sought to restore glory to the Empire through reform of the military. In this process he battled with Patriarch Michael Cerularius over confiscated church property. In doing so he made enemies of everyone but the army. He called a synod to have Cerularius deposed, but the patriarch died before action could be taken. The emperor died shortly thereafter of fever.

Constantine X Ducas (1059-1067) was a scholar who allowed the vast bureaucracy of the government to undo and reverse the military reforms of Isaac Comnenus just when they needed the military the most. He left a demoralized and ill-equipped army to deal with the new menace of the Seljuk Turks who were moving their way through Anatolia (central Turkey). On his death bed he committed his wife Eudocia not to marry again.

To ensure a legitimate emperor, Eudocia married Romanus Diogenes (r. 1068-1071). Romanus raised a great army and headed off to fight the Turks. He fought courageously but suffered a terrible defeat at the Battle of Manzikert, the worst defeat in Byzantine history up to that time. He was made prisoner of the Sultan, treated very courteously, and then sent back to Constantinople after agreeing to pay a large ransom and to give up small amounts of territory. In the mean time word reached Constantinople that the Normans had finally taken the last of the Byzantine holdings in Italy, ending five centuries of Byzantine rule in Italy. A palace coup overthrew Romanus and made Eudocia’s son by Constantine X the new emperor. Romanus had his eyes gauged out by the perpetrators and was sent to a monastery to die.

Michael VII Ducas (1071-1078) refused to honor the treaty with the Sultan. Consequently the Turks invaded two years later and conquered most of what is today Turkey, depriving the empire of most of its grain producing areas and much of its manpower. Only the western part of Asia Minor was retained by the empire.

Michael’s continued incompetence led to a deteriorating situation in the empire’s property in the Balkans, huge inflation, and many insurrections. Finally, he was overthrown in favor of Nicephorus Botaneiates, (r. 1078-1081) an old man in his seventies who abdicated three years later after an uprising in favor of a 37-year-old general, the nephew of Isaac Comnenus.

Alexius Comnenus (1081-1118) was the greatest of the aristocratic generals who became emperor. The first decade of his reign was difficult. He had to deal with attacks by the Normans and others. But he reorganized the army with compulsory service and harsh financial measures. He was a brilliant politician, making peace first with the Seljuk Turks by granting them territories they had already conquered and accepting them as vassals of the imperial throne. Then he made an alliance with Venice which had been building a great commercial and maritime navy. The Venetians were to help the Byzantines in return for the right to trade freely in imperial provinces. He was not well-liked by his subjects but he brought stability back to the empire.

When Alexius had been crowned as emperor he had been excommunicated by Pope Gregory VII. Needless to say his relations with the pope had not been overly friendly. Pope Urban II had lifted the excommunication and tried to improve the relationship. In 1094 Urban II sent an embassy to Alexius inviting to send representatives to a church council. This council which was eventually held in Clermont in France was the sight of
Urban’s announcement of the First Crusade. The emperors had been asking for help from the West against their menace the Turks since the 1070s. And the Turks had conquered the holy city of Jerusalem in 1077. But Alexius knew that a crusade of thousands of undisciplined soldiers tramping around in his territory, demanding food, and not recognizing his authority was much more than he had bargained for. He also was not pleased to have western Christians establishing Latin principalities in the Holy Land in his domain. This First Crusade (1096-1101) was successful in recapturing Jerusalem and other cities.

John II Comnenus (1118-1143), son of Alexius, loved by his people, was gentle, pious, and generous. Like his father he was also a great soldier and very successful in most of his military campaigns, even winning back some lost territories. On a hunting trip he was wounded in the hand. Infection set in and he died.

Manuel Comnenus (1143-1180) was John’s son. Manuel was tall, handsome, charming, and loved women. He was an intellectual who loved to argue doctrinal issues. During his reign the disastrous Second Crusade (1147-1148) came to the Middle East, was defeated, and limped back home. Manuel spent much of his long reign attempting to regain lost territory. If he had concentrated his energies in the east he may have been successful. But he overtaxed his resources in his many wars and diplomatic excursions in Italy, Hungary, Serbia, Venice and with the Western Emperor and the pope. In spite of many successes, the empire was worse off when he died than it was when he began his reign.

Alexius II Comnenus (r. 1180-1183) was only ten when he ascended to the throne. His mother, Mary, a western princess, acted as regent. He had been married to a nine-year-old French princess. Alexius came to an untimely end in a military coup led by his 64-year old first cousin, Andronicus Comnenus.

Andronicus I Comnenus (1183-1185) won the throne with the support of the army and navy. During the coup, rebellion against Alexius and Mary broke out in the city and a massacre of westerners in the city occurred. In the aftermath, Andronicus had Mary and Alexius executed. He then married the twelve-year-old widow of Alexius.

Andronicus eliminated corruption in the government except for his own dishonest ways which grew greater as time went on. He was cruel and lost the popularity he once had. When a Sicilian army desolated Thessalonica, the second city of the empire, and then headed towards Constantinople the people rebelled behind his cousin, Isaac Angelus. Andronicus was captured, had his right hand cut off, went to prison for several days without food and water, then was blinded in one eye and was then paraded on a camel while his former subjects abused him with rocks, spikes, filth, and even boiling water. Finally he was hung up by his feet until he finally expired.

Isaac Angelus (1185-1195) immediately stopped the advance of the Sicilian army and then later defeated them. However, what had been a promising start turned into the first of three terrible reigns by the Angelus emperors. Isaac sold volumes of government offices. Corruption drastically increased. The aristocracy became much less manageable. The Balkans were lost to the Bulgarians, never to be regained. Worst of all, Jerusalem was lost to the Moslems in 1187. This brought about the Third Crusade, one led by such notables as Richard the Lion Hearted of England and Philip Augustus of France and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Barbarossa brought an army of 150,000 men with him. When Isaac threatened not to help transport them to Asia, Barbarossa threatened to attack Constantinople, a foreboding of things to come. The Third Crusade ended with the recapture by the Christians of some territory but not Jerusalem.

In 1195, Isaac’s older brother, Alexius, deposed and blinded Isaac.

Alexius III (1195-1203). The most powerful pope in history, Innocent III, was made pontiff in 1198. He immediately declared for a Fourth Crusade. This crusade was headed for Egypt by sea and would need many ships, obtainable from only one source: the Republic of Venice. When in 1202 the army of crusaders gathered in Venice there was only a third of the predicted numbers. The number of ships could not be paid for. Venice refused to release only a part of the ships. Finally, the Doge (a name for the governor of Venice) agreed to postpone payment if the crusaders would help him recover the Venetian city of Zara and allow him to accompany the crusade. This offer was accepted and the army set sail in 1202. When the crusaders retook Zara, Pope Innocent III excommunicated the whole army. Undeterred they sailed onward. Word then came that the son of the blind Isaac Angelus had escaped from prison and had ended up at the court of Philip of Swabia, his brother-in-law, and brother of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VI. Isaac’s son, another Alexius, made an offer to finance the rest of the crusade if they would help him depose his uncle and take the throne. He also offered to make the eastern church submit to the authority of the pope. Given the difficulties that the crusade had faced this offer was immediately accepted. By June 1203 the crusaders’ boats were in the waters off Constantinople. In a month’s time the city was taken. The crusaders withdrew to the other side of the Golden Horn (an arm of the sea on the eastern side of Constantinople’s peninsula) to await the promises Alexius had made.

On August 1, 1203, Alexius IV Angelus (1203-1204) was crowned alongside his blind father. The treasury was empty; Alexius could not pay what he had promised. His people were unhappy to have a foreign army in their midst. Alexius was assassinated in January 1204 by Alexius Ducas, who became Alexius V (1204).

Alexius V began strengthening the city walls and refused to make more payments. Led and encouraged by Doge (The Doge was the title of the governor of Venice) Dandolo, the crusaders attacked the city on April 9. By the next morning the city was taken and pillaged the city, stole its treasures and profaned its churches. They fouled the great church of St. Sophia, bringing their horses into the building and placing a prostitute in the Patriarch’s chair so she could sing bawdy songs and dance immodestly in the holy
place. The Latin crusaders set up Latin kingdoms in Constantinople and other places in the empire. An exile government of the Greeks was set up in Nicaea. The Latins ruled the Latin Empire of Constantinople until driven out in 1261. The Byzantine Empire never really recovered from this conquest.

The Paleologan dynasty

In 1261, the armies of the emperor in exile, Michael VIII Paleologus (r. 1259-82), recaptured Constantinople. Paleologus founded a new dynasty, which presided over the last two centuries of the empire. But his empire was small and exhausted. He appealed to Pope Urban IV for a reunification of the eastern and western churches, knowing that if the eastern church submitted to Rome the Latins would have no excuse to attack the empire. Michael VIII Paleologus was particularly worried about the continual threat of attack by Charles of Anjou, King of Sicily. The act of union was his attempt to prevent such an attack. The union between the two churches took several years and at least two more popes before it was finally celebrated at the Council of Lyon in 1274. This union, however, raised a storm of protest in the East. No one wanted it. Many people of many classes ended up in prison over the issue. The reunion, therefore, occurred unrealistically only on paper since no one in Constantinople really adhered to it. By the time Michael died, the attack by Charles of Anjou had never occurred. Lucky circumstances had always prevented it. Michael had saved the empire by his diplomatic stall tactics. But in the eyes of many he died a heretic, having not renounced his submission to the pope. He also had not improved the empire’s finances, leaving it on the verge of bankruptcy.

Andronicus II Paleologus (r. 1282-1328) immediately rejected the union with the pope. He dismissed mercenaries in the army and abolished the navy, gravely weakening the armed forces. He did all this while the Turks advanced through Anatolia (modern central Turkey).

Andronicus had to deal with attacks by the Venetians, plots by his own wife, a new Duchy in Byzantine territory set up by pirates, and the loss of some territory to Charles II of Anjou. Most ominous was the rise of a new group of Turks who would eventually be known by the name of their leader, Othman—the Ottomans. Under Andronicus the treasury was always empty and the empire kept losing land and shrinking. Finally, his grandson (whom he had disowned for killing another of his grandsons, in fact, his own brother) rebelled against him causing a civil war in 1320. By 1322 the grandson, Andronicus III Paleologus forced his grandfather to accept him as joint ruler. In 1327 civil war between them broke out again. Andronicus II finally abdicated.

Andronicus III Paleologus (r. 1328-1341) had to fight revolutions among his Slavic subjects in the Balkans. The Ottoman Turks gained more and more power and more land in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). He and his able and loyal minister, John Cantacuzenus, built up the Byzantine navy and ruled wisely but the fate of the empire was by now almost impossible to reverse. Andronicus died from illness.

Because of jealousy and intrigue, when Andronicus III died the Empress, Patriarch, and admiral of the navy began plotting the downfall of John Cantacuzenus who had really always just wanted to remain loyal to the empire and its emperor. He was now forced to cause civil war. The outcome was that Cantacuzenus was named co-emperor with Andronicus’s son, John. Cantacuzenus married his daughter to the young emperor that he would govern with. Cantacuzenus reigned from 1347 until, after a short civil war instigated by John V in 1354, John Cantacuzenus was forced to resign and retired to a monastery.

John V Paleologus (r. 1341-1391). The Serbs continued to make large territorial gains on the empire in the west. The empire now consisted of Thrace (northeastern Greece), a few Aegean islands, Thessalonica, and Constantinople. In 1347 the Black Death killed eight-ninths of the population of Constantinople. The coast was continually attacked by pirates. Food was bought at exorbitant prices from the Genoese (Genoa, Italy). Trade was stagnant. John’s mother had earlier pawned the crown jewels to buy help against the Turks. An earthquake in 1354 allowed the Ottoman Turks to take over Gallipoli (southwest of Constantinople), the first time the Turks had moved into Europe. The situation of the empire was not good. It got worse. By the time John V died in 1391 he had experienced rebellions by his son and grandson and the loss of the Balkans to the Turks. Constantinople was now an island in a sea of Turks.

Manuel II Paleologus (r. 1391-1425). In 1396 the West sent an army of 100,000 men to aid Manuel in his resistance to the Turks. The Sultan’s armies routed and massacred the Christians. 10,000 men were beheaded in his presence. Manuel II spent 1400 and 1401 in Europe trying to drudge up support for a crusade against the Turks. He received some money but not much support for the crusade. While in Europe he received news that he believed saved the day: a Mongol army from Asia had destroyed the Ottoman army and taken the Sultan Bayezit prisoner. The Mongol army withdrew from Asia Minor in 1403 but left the Ottoman empire divided. In the struggle for the Sultan’s throne Manuel was able to throw his support to Mehmet against his brothers and helped him succeed to power. In gratitude for his help, Mehmet promised his loyalty to Manuel II. For a while the emperor had a reprieve. Unfortunately, Mehmet died in 1421. An attempt to play off two individuals who sought the Ottoman throne ended up incurring the deep anger of the eventual winner, Murad II. The reprieve was over.

John VIII Paleologus (r. 1425-1448) essentially inherited Constantinople as all that was left of the empire. It was now a city of 50,000, the population having been greatly reduced by plague and sieges. He attended a council in Basel and then Florence from 1437 to 1439 that was called by Pope Martin V in an effort find a solution to Constantinople’s problems. It proclaimed a union of the east and west churches but was really only a piece of paper and came to nothing. It was universally condemned by the East. The West believing that the union was valid, saw its way to launch a crusade in 1443 but its army was annihilated in 1444.

Constantine XI Paleologus (r. 1448-1453). When the Mehmet II became the Turkish Sultan in 1451 he swore to live at peace with Constantine XI. Within a short period of time it became clear that
Mehmet was preparing an attack. Constantine XI sent ambassadors to remind him of his pledge. They were immediately executed. The siege of Constantinople was soon to begin. Mehmet II ordered a special cannon made for his planned siege that was twenty-seven feet long and eight inches thick. It had a muzzle that was two and a half feet across. It could fire once every 2-3 hours a thirteen hundred pound ball a distance of over a mile. On April 6, 1453 it started firing. Mehmet had an army of 100,000. Constantinople had 7,000 men protecting the fourteen miles of wall. Still the walls of Constantinople had always made the city invincible, and the great chain that lay across the Golden Horn, where the city's only harbor was, prevented ships from entering that body of water. Unfortunately, the Byzantines discovered they were not dealing with an ordinary adversary. Sultan Mehmet II had already made preparations for entering the Golden Horn. He built a road from the Sea of Marmara over a 200 foot hill with metal tracks. He loaded 70 ships in wooden cradles with metal wheels and carried them over the hill and into the Golden Horn. Now Constantine's harbor was no longer secure and its citizens had to guard three and a half more miles of wall. The people recognized it was just a matter of time before the city would be taken. On the evening of May 28, 1453 the great church of St. Sophia was crowded for its evening service. On the morning of May 29, 1453, the Turks entered the city and slaughtered the people. The emperor, Constantine XI, died in the fighting. The Byzantine empire ceased to exist.