

LESSON 3

The Rise of the Byzantine Empire

THINKING FOCUS

What were some of the accomplishments of the Byzantine Empire?

Key Terms

- mosaic
- commerce

► *This carved horn was probably blown to announce the beginning of entertainments at the Hippodrome.*

In January 532, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora attended festivities at the Hippodrome, a stadium for athletic competitions and chariot races. Also in attendance were supporters of the Blues and the Greens, two rival teams that competed in many events, including chariot racing. Not only fiercely loyal to their own teams, these fans were equally committed to opposing political and religious points of view.

Justinian supported the Blues, so throughout the day the

Greens shouted insults at him. After the 22nd chariot race, Justinian ordered the Greens to be silent, but they refused to be quiet. Justinian then had insults shouted back at them, but this just angered the Greens even more. Fights broke out between the rival groups, and the fighting escalated into rioting in Constantinople's streets. The rioting continued for a week while Justinian and Theodora, safe within their palace, debated whether to flee or to attempt to restore order. Finally, Justinian had the fighting put to an end. But by that time, Constantinople lay in ruins.

The Byzantine Culture

Realizing that Constantinople needed to be rebuilt, Emperor Justinian organized the reconstruction with great energy. When the work was done, the city was protected by a triple line of walls along its edge and a single wall along the harbor. Just beyond the triple walls was a moat 60 feet wide and 22 feet deep that could be flooded

with water if the town was threatened.

The city had a water system, a sewer system, and a fire department. The streets were lit at night by lamps. There were 8 public baths, 153 private ones, and 2 theaters. Furthermore, there were beautiful palaces and churches.



A New Type of Art

Justinian's most important contribution to the new Constantinople was the religious art and architecture that he commissioned. Of particular note were the mosaics created during Justinian's reign. The mosaic was an expensive art form, but, with funding from Justinian, artists were able to refine the art of mosaic-making and create masterpieces. **Mosaics** are colored fragments of glass or quartz embedded in plaster. Read A Closer Look on the next page to see how people restore, or repair, mosaics today.

The Byzantines also created architectural masterpieces. None of them was more spectacular than the new Hagia Sophia—Saint Sophia in English—the most important religious structure in Constantinople. After the rioting Greens destroyed the old Hagia Sophia, Justinian had it rebuilt into a magnificent structure. It had columns of spotted green marble, walls of polished marble of many colors, and many glittering mosaics. But the most awe-inspiring



aspect of the Hagia Sophia was its dome. It was 180 feet high and 108 feet wide, and through its stained-glass windows, light flooded the interior of the church.

A New Set of Laws

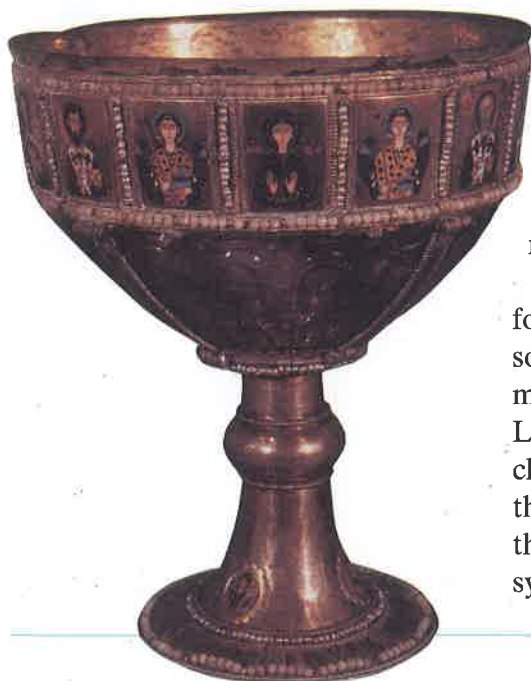
In 528, Justinian gave 10 men the task of condensing the 1,600 books of classic Roman law. A year later they came up with a well-organized system of 4,652 laws. The new legal system was called the Justinian Code. It extended the rights of women, children, and slaves but also called for harsher penalties for crimes.

Criminals could have their property taken away, lose an eye or hand, or even be put to death, depending on their crime. Nevertheless, the laws proved to be very effective at maintaining order.

In fact, Roman law, in the form of the Justinian Code, was so effective that the peoples of many nations in Europe and Latin America chose to use it as the model for their legal systems.

▲ Mosaics like these from 547 give us some idea of how the Byzantine emperor Justinian and his empress Theodora actually looked. These mosaics were found in Ravenna, Italy.

▼ The wealth that could be found in Constantinople is seen in the chalice, or cup, and bracelets from the city. Gold and jewels combine to create all three items. Note the mosaics of religious figures on the chalice.



A New Empire

Justinian also considered it his duty to recover Roman lands in the West that had been lost, as he said, “through indolence [laziness].” From 533 to his death in 565, Justinian’s armies did regain parts of Spain, all of Italy, and North Africa. But, after his death, some lands were lost again to outsiders. What’s more, battling over these lands distracted the Byzantine military and distracted it from another more serious enemy, the Persians. ■



▲ This is a view of the interior of Hagia Sophia.

The Persian Threat

Although barbarian tribes ultimately regained some lands in the West, the Persians were a greater threat to the Byzantine Empire. The Persians most closely matched the Byzantines in strength. They were also committed to battling the Byzantines for control of Armenia as well as to regaining control of Turkey, Syria, and Egypt. For 500 years, the Persians and Byzantines fought, but neither ever won an advantage for long.

In the early 600s, the Persians made their move. In a campaign lasting 17 years, they conquered

part of Mesopotamia, occupied Asia Minor, and finally took Syria, Jerusalem, and Egypt.

This victory was short-lived. In 627, Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (hehr uh KLY uhs) defeated the

Persian army. The Persians had to give up all the land they had recently won.

Until 1453, the Byzantine Empire was an important center of **commerce**, or trade,

and culture. But constant warfare had weakened both empires. The Persians, in particular, soon had trouble mustering the strength to fight off new invaders. ■



■ What distinctive elements of Byzantine culture developed under Justinian’s rule?

◀ This cameo shows a Persian ruler taking a Roman emperor prisoner.

■ How did the constant battling between Byzantium and Persia affect the two empires?

R E V I E W

1. **FOCUS** What were some of the accomplishments of the Byzantine Empire?
2. **CONNECT** In what ways was Constantinople like Rome? How was it different?
3. **HISTORY** How has the Justinian Code affected the modern world?
4. **GEOGRAPHY** Why and how did Justinian rebuild Constantinople?
5. **CRITICAL THINKING** Why do you think two countries might battle for centuries over control of a certain territory? What are some of the things people fight about today?
6. **ACTIVITY** Imagine that you have been asked to help revise the laws in your town. In small groups, make a list of laws in existence that you think ought to be changed. Revise each law on your list. Then as a class, vote on the laws to determine which should be added to your legal system.