

The Genius of Byzantium: Reflections on a Forgotten Empire

“Le grand absent—c’est l’Empire”

C. Dufour, *Constantinople Imaginaire*

Everywhere Western man longs for Constantinople and nowhere has he any idea how to find her. To do so is to reclaim, at last, the meaning of an empire that once defined a hierarchy of imagination long ago abandoned by our civilization; of an eleven-century political, religious and cultural struggle that sought to reconcile Christianity and Antiquity, transforming the Western spirit into a brilliant battleground between Latin and Greek, Augustus and Basileus, reason and faith, ancient and modern. Yet to unearth this Byzantium, this “heaven of the human mind”, as Yeats dreamed her, is not to go searching through histories and legends, glorious ruins or immortal poems. It is, instead, to be found retracing the evolution of a new and profound conflict in Western thought that began with the mysterious conversion of the first Constantine and ended, at the gates of the marble and gold City called ‘the world’s desire’ by the sons of that city, with the unconquerable faith of the last Constantine—himself heir to the great Palaiologoi who resurrected the dormant title of *Hellene* to describe their own noble line of descent.

No Byzantine ever referred to himself as Byzantine—it was ‘Roman’ all the way. It was, in fact, the librarian of the wealthy 16th century Fugger family, Hieronymus Wolf, who coined the term “Byzantium”; its common usage, in turn, taking root only as of the early 20th century among the gentleman-scholars of Oxford University—so intrigued, as they were, by the empire’s fall from grace and its even harder fall from Memory. Byzantium’s aura remained singular, unique and

unmistakeable down the centuries after its collapse. "Constantinople had been left naked and desolate without a prince or a people", wrote Edward Gibbon of the fateful events of May 29, 1453 in the 68th—and may I add, absolutely spellbinding—chapter of his [*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*](#). "But she could not be despoiled, and the incomparable genius of the place will ever triumph over the accidents of time and fortune". Even the Ottomans referred to 'Constantinople' in their official documents until 1923, no doubt aware of the power and beauty that the monumental *civitas dei* could still evoke—though by then she was nowhere, no more, to be lived.

But when we set out to locate this forgotten world, such definitions mean little because we no longer recognize their significance. There is no literature tempting us back slowly, chapter by chapter, into the center of Byzantium's *mysterium magnum* that once imposed itself upon the world. Few are the histories which studiously map the philosophical bloodlines that coursed persistently and chaotically, from classical Hellenism to Roman civil jurisprudence directly into Byzantium—"the restless movement toward something new", wrote the art critic T.E. Hulme of Byzantium. We share none of the spontaneous literacy of Byzantium as we do other great empires; no distinct sense of its heritage and identity save for phantomy Eastern Orthodox churches and once-a-generation blockbuster museum exhibitions. One speaks of the Western roots of the Eastern empire but what of the Eastern roots of the Western empire? "The intercourse of two worlds", wrote Norman Baynes of the empire, "the Greek and the Roman, one current carrying the armed power of Rome to the East, the other carrying the culture of the Greeks to the West—Byzantine civilization could call upon both". The distinguished Dr. Baynes, along with Sir Steven Runciman, an English aristocrat, and Dmitri Obolensky, himself of noble Russian descent, launched the Byzantine "revolution" at Oxford in the 1920s. Runciman, for example, was the second biggest-selling author

for Cambridge University Press in the first half of the 20th century and twenty of his twenty-seven works on the empire have stayed in print. But who would know?

One might blame all this on the corroded template that is a modern liberal arts education, with its routine mantras that “the Greeks” ended with Pericles, Alexander and the Roman conquest of Greece. Or that ‘Rome’ itself ended with the conquests of Alaric, after which Charlemagne abruptly appears on the scene. The Shakespearian emperors of Byzantium have curiously inspired no epics; the seven Great Councils of the empire—the very organization of the Christian Church—accorded no honor of mythologization. The names of a Belisarius or Bessarion; Narses or Nicephoras evoke blank stares. Even contemporary geopolitical discourse rarely summons the saga of Byzantium’s gallant protection of the West against the first onslaughts of Muslim invaders. Despite the laurel crowning Charles Martel that it was he who stemmed invasion from “Saracen yoke”, the real bulwark were the Byzantines, “more realistic about their Muslim neighbors than the distant popes and princes of the West”, wrote Runciman, by leading the first arrest of Muslim conquest under Leo III in 718. With the exception of Byzantium’s cult-like scholarly following, we are left with a disconnected deficit in understanding an era so critical to the cultural, religious and political maturation of Western man. We are all the more impoverished for it.

The road that travels from modern Greece back to Byzantium back to ancient Greece is best traveled across the connective tissue of language and memory evoked by that country’s three great 20th century poets: Odysseus Elytis, George Seferis and Constantine Cavafis—together the collective proof that these “Greece’s” are, *in essentia*, one in the same. Bound by the wars and ideological extremes of their times, their works evoke the melancholy of lost worlds and the longing for a modern Hellenic identity. I am reminded of the great line of Elytis: “Simplicity was easier for the ancients”, he wrote in

his memoir [Open Papers](#). "Their hand had not yet met the wrinkle". Byzantium was all about the wrinkle: the obfuscation of the rational, crystalline thought that was ancient Greece's pre-Christian clean lines; the struggle of human finiteness and imperfection against the ominous survey of the Eternal; the Byzantine belief that man, 'suddenly', was not the *telos* of his own destiny. The light of ancient Greece now had the shadow of Christian mystery around it—"that fabulous formless darkness" in Yeats' words; the knowledge that truth no longer depended on Reason alone.

The "wrinkle" was also Byzantium's contradictions: It was the empire of absolute rule ordained by God, yet civic rebellion was made constitutional under Justinian I the Great. It put all military power in the hands of an emperor as an expression of that divine will, yet the concept of Holy War was rejected. Early on, imperial ceremonies at Constantinople were a half-pagan, half-Christian affair, with the chariot of Sol Invectus, the pagan sun-god, set in the market place with a Cross over its carriage, while a Kyrie Eleison was sung and dedication to the Virgin Mary was consecrated. It was the empire adored by France's Age of Absolutism yet detested by the Enlightenment. The official language at court and among the diplomatic elite was, until the 7th century, Latin, while merchants and bankers spoke Greek. It was resolute in its dual Roman and Hellenistic allegiances and yet the Arab, the Persian and the Armenian, the Slav, the Seljuk, the Ottoman, the Genoese, the Venetian and the Norman were all brought into its cultural fold. The very Byzantium that closed down Plato's Academy in the 6th century was the same empire whose scholars preserved extant works of Greek philosophers—"the world's librarians", as Baynes described the Byzantines, calling them the heirs of the Alexandrians. Even its birth and death seemed contradictory: Byzantium was founded on the notion of *libertas ecclesiae* and ended in a religious captivity.

But despite its many internal conflicts, it flourished and

endured. At its height under Justinian the Great, the empire bordered the Mediterranean Sea in nearly its entirety, extending from southern Spain and Italy to northern Africa to all of Asia Minor, the Near East and Armenia. Then, after centuries of contractions, fitful expansions and even exile, by the year 1000 it could claim states and nations from the Gulf of Finland to the southern Peloponnese and from the Adriatic to the Caucasus, as owing allegiance to the Byzantine church and empire. As the Russian Orthodox scholar Alexander Schmemmann has noted, Byzantium invented the concept of East-West as a religious consciousness in imperial polity; at the dawn of modernity it ushered in the philosophical humanism of the Italian Renaissance; the foundations of British law, and its imperial inheritors were the Holy Roman Empire, Holy Russia and Ottoman Turkey. Its aesthetic heirs live on in Western painting and architecture. "Western art", wrote the architect and historian W.R. Lethaby in 1904, "owes an immense wealth of debt to Byzantium". The empire's cultural unity not only survived the catastrophic events of 1180 and 1240 but acquired a new content and strength in the late Middle Ages to become the longest-enduring empire in the history of the West.

The intellectual, and what we may also perhaps deem the psychological, foundations of Byzantium were founded on the fundamental upheaval of philosophical thought set in motion in the 4th century. While to the Latin educated, Aquinas dominates the attempt to "reconcile" Antiquity and Christianity, it was since the time of Constantine, that the Greek (Alexandria-Athens-Nicomedian) Church Fathers were entirely preoccupied with that topic. This is not to say that life in the New Rome was a hotbed of radicalism and freedom of thought—certainly, the empire's cruelest tyrants chased 'heretics' to the ends of the earth and back and defended constant abuses of the corrupted State-as-Church apparatus. But, in far contrast to the general image of Byzantium possessing a static intellectual life, the empire was the place and the platform for excellent philosophical-religious

thinkers who were not without a certain colorful defiance in their protests against various emperors and their various styles of seizing authority on Church, State and public life.

Only twenty-five years after the height of Christian persecution under Diocletian in both the *pars orientalis* and *pars occidentalis* of his divided empire, the Christianization of Rome coursed dramatically through three pivotal events. First, the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which proclaimed official tolerance of Christianity; the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, presided over by Constantine the Great to address the Roman empire's new relationship between Church and State; then the founding of Constantinople in 330 AD. These events turned that century into one of the most revolutionary eras in Western history.

An ensuing spiritual and intellectual metamorphoses took place on three levels: in the relationship of man to himself; of man to the State, and that of the Church to the State. One's self-awareness as a 'political animal' in service to the Roman authority now had a disturbing aspect of Individualism to it—Individualism, *not* in the modern sense of autarkic self-realization, but in that of Christian moral conscience as a man's—or an emperor's—newest and highest personal authority. Now, secular authority was to be answerable to a 'Greater' power and moral law. This, in turn, introduced a raging political-intellectual crises of how to allocate temporal and divine spheres of power in the empire.

How, by whom, and to what extent was man to be governed when suddenly the Individual, Caesar and his State were all at once moral equals?—the very question posed in a famous 16th century work, *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* that would later influence the American Revolution.

Byzantium also inherited Roman law, as applied in ancient Rome, and power at Constantinople was in no way unlimited. In 429, Emperor Theodosius II, irritated at the lack of legal

sophistication in the East, founded a school of law at Constantinople and then set about to organize what was to become the famous Codex of Theodosius II—a nine year work of twenty-two jurists from the senate of Constantinople resulting in the codification of 2,500 Roman *constitutiones* (imperial pronouncements) from the time of Constantine up until his own rule. The *Corpus Juris Civilis*, organized under Justinian I The Great, was the four-part, fifty book culmination of the Theodosian Code, far greater in depth and scope. This revival of Roman law became the basis of all civil and ecclesiastical law (*ecclesia vivit lege romana*—“the Church lives by Roman law”), and the work enjoyed great prestige, later influencing Norman jurisprudence and modern public international law. In the 8th century, the emperor Leo III established the limitations of his own imperial legislative power: namely, the Holy Scriptures, the decisions of the synods and councils, and the Roman Law. The *Epanagoge* of the 9th century expanded the powers of Patriarch over the emperor more broadly than had appeared in Justinian’s time.

From these extremes of tolerance and tyranny, the Byzantine citizen—Roman by civil allegiance, Hellene by intellectual affinity—would to the very end believe that his empire was founded on a magnificent Idea—the creation of empire as an expression of Divine Will. It was in that idealized setting that a man, it was thought, would unite his conscience to external state power and this power with revealed Truth—“a universal empire that embraced, in theory, all people of the earth as members of a sacred gift”, in the words of Runciman. Such is the Constantinople we have lost.

That loss was to take place that fateful May of 1453, beginning at four in the morning and ending with the deaths of 600,000 out of a population of 3 million. Events as we mainly know them have come down primarily through the eyewitness-account of a Venetian diplomat, Nicolo Barbaro, who kept his *Diary on the Conquest of Constantinople*, published later

in Rome under the guidance of Cardinal Bessarion, one of the cultural hero-figures of the rescue of Byzantium's treasures as well as indirect intellectual catalyst of the Renaissance. Three worlds converged upon the City that day—Antiquity, the medieval and the modern met at the Theodosian Walls across the Sea of Marmara, as a twelve-hundred year-old empire came to an end under Ottoman assault. The ancient was preserved in the thousands of volumes of classical literature transported to Venice as an entire fleet was brought together for their rescue. The medieval world ended as the Christian emperors fought for their Cross while 100,000 citizens and imperial princes alike awaited their slaughter inside the Hagia Sophia cathedral—the culmination of a battle that lasted fifty-five days and 7000 Byzantine troops fought against approximately 200,000 Ottoman ones. The modern looked to the future: those young enough at the time of the destruction of Constantinople would still be alive to hear, only forty years later, of a New World being discovered half-way around the globe. From the Heaven that commanded Constantine's *In hoc signo, vinces* on the Milvian battlefield twenty-five years before that emperor's own Christian conversion to the Hell that descended inside that great church where the last speech of Constantine Paleologi "was the funeral oration of the Roman Empire," in Gibbon's words, Byzantium had passed. The Habsburgs acquired all of Central Europe. The Balkans descended into four centuries of dark ages. Tsarist Russia crowned itself Byzantium's heir, now calling itself the 'Third Rome'...

In his poem "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats, as scholar Steven Conway has pointed out, derives his sense of life through aesthetic ideals. He has contempt for this world that is devoid of respect for the timelessness of beauty in great art and literature. Thus the poet, turning his attention across centuries, continents and oceans, yearns for "the golden boughs of Byzantium", where he may exist in a thought-world that once strove for that ideal, and where he may "sing/to the lords and ladies of Byzantium/of what is past, or passing, or

to come.” Perhaps Yeats, gazing Eastward, speaks for that ideal-longing Western poet imperishable in us all.

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