Civilization in Eastern Europe: Byzantium and Orthodox Europe

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

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**Late in the 10th century, Vladimir,** king of a Russian state centered in the city of Kiev, faced an important decision. What major religion should he choose—not only for himself, but for his people? Some Christian activity had been brought in from the Byzantine Empire to the south, and Vladimir's grandmother had converted, but the majority of Russians were traditional polytheists.

Vladimir's decision raised two issues. First, why decide? Why not adhere to tradition? Most of the societies around Russia were part of the growing surge of world religions—religions that appealed to people of many cultures. Vladimir likely thought that his kingdom's growing trade and military activity would be complemented by a religion that had wider appeal than that of the traditional Russian gods. Vladimir was also defending his rule against internal strife and external attack: A successful move to impose a new religion would bolster his authority.
Second, decide on what? Placed as Russia was, Vladimir had knowledge of Islam, Judaism, Western Catholicism, and Byzantine, or Orthodox, Christianity. Legend has it that he rejected Judaism because it was not associated with a strong state. He rejected Catholicism (gaining ground in neighboring Poland) because he wanted no interference from the pope. He rejected Islam because of its prohibition of alcohol: “for drink is the joy of the Russian.”

In truth, the decision was probably easy. The Byzantine Empire was Russia’s prosperous neighbor, a leading trading partner and sometime military ally. Vladimir was eager to marry the sister of the Byzantine emperor—according to another legend, the emperor was reluctant to give his sister in marriage to what he considered a backward warrior, but Vladimir captured a major Byzantine city and refused to give it back until the emperor relented. Choosing Orthodox Christianity would be a part of this larger relationship with Byzantium.

Vladimir’s decision was unquestionably important. Additional Byzantine influences, from art and literature to manners, began to shape Russian culture. Christianity was extended eastward, changing the boundaries between Christianity and Islam. The Russian state did gain new prestige and used religion to help unify its far-flung populace. At the same time, Vladimir’s choice separated the kingdom from Roman Catholic western Europe, helping to create what would become a long-standing cultural division between eastern and western Europe. The implications of this separation continue to affect world affairs, even as other parts of eastern and western Europe are uniting.

CIVILIZATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

What was the relationship between the Byzantine Empire and the earlier Roman Empire and what were the main similarities and differences?

During the postclassical period two major Christian civilizations took shape in Europe. Both developed close relations with the Islamic world, and both played major roles in long distance trade. One, centered on the papacy in Rome, encompassed Western Europe, but the other radiated out from Constantinople. Both civilizations came to illustrate the diversification of state forms that was characteristic of the post classical period.

The Power of the Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine empire maintained high levels of political, economic, and cultural activity during much of the period from 600 to 1450 C.E. It controlled an important but fluctuating swath of territory in the Balkans, the northern Middle East, and the eastern Mediterranean. Its leaders saw themselves as latter-day Roman emperors, and their government was in many ways a direct continuation of the eastern portion of the late Roman empire.

The real significance of the Byzantine empire goes well beyond its ability to keep Rome’s memory alive. The empire lasted for almost a thousand years, between Rome’s collapse in the West and the final overthrow of the regime by Turkish invaders. The empire’s capital, Constantinople, was one of the truly great cities of the world, certainly the most opulent and important city in Europe in this.
period. From Constantinople radiated one of the two major branches of Christianity: the Orthodox Christian churches that became dominant throughout most of eastern Europe.

Like the other great civilizations of the period, the Byzantine empire spread its cultural and political influence to parts of the world that had not previously been controlled by any major civilization. Just as Muslim influence helped shape civilization in parts of Africa south of the Sahara, the Byzantines began to shape civilization in the Balkans and western Russia (present-day Ukraine and Belarus as well as western Russia proper).

The empire also served as a major agent in interregional trade. It had active exchanges with the Arab world and with other parts of Asia. The empire even imported techniques of silk production from China, which reduced its dependence on foreign trade for this commodity but showed its connection to larger fashion standards. Constantinople served as a hub for goods brought in from east central Europe and Russia, to be exchanged for Arab and Byzantine products. In various ways, the empire played a key role in extending the range of contacts as part of the formation of the transcontinental network.

There were many commonalities between developments in eastern and in western Europe. In both cases, civilization spread northward partly because of the missionary appeal of the Christian religion. In both cases, polytheism gave way to monotheism, although important compromises were made, particularly at the popular level. In both cases, more northerly political units, such as Russia, Poland, Germany, and France, struggled for political definition without being able to rival the political sophistication of the more advanced societies in Asia and north Africa or in Byzantium itself. In both cases, new trading activities brought northern regions into contact with the major centers of world commerce, including Constantinople. In both cases, newly civilized areas looked back to the Greco-Roman past, as well as to Christianity, for cultural inspiration, using some of the same political ideas and artistic styles.

Yet with all these shared ingredients, the civilizations that expanded in the east and developed in the west operated largely on separate tracks. They produced different versions of Christianity that were culturally as well as organizationally separate, even hostile. The civilizations had little mutual contact. Until late in this period, commercial patterns in both cases ran south to north rather than east to west. During most of the postclassical millennium, major portions of eastern Europe were significantly more advanced than western Europe in political sophistication, cultural range, and economic vitality. Byzantium long surpassed the West in its involvement with interregional trade.
When the two civilizations did meet, in this period and later, they met as distant cousins, related but not close kin.

THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

10.2 How does the Byzantine Empire fit the theme of state building and expansion?

The Byzantine empire in some senses began in the 4th century C.E., when the Romans set up their eastern capital in Constantinople. This city quickly became the most vigorous center of the otherwise fading imperial structure. Emperor Constantine constructed a host of elegant buildings, including Christian churches, in his new city, which was built on the foundations of a previously modest town called Byzantium. Soon, separate eastern emperors ruled from the new metropolis, even before the western portion of the empire fell to the Germanic invaders. They warded off invading Huns and other intruders while enjoying a solid tax base in the peasant agriculture of the eastern Mediterranean. Constantinople was responsible for the Balkan peninsula, the northern Middle East, the Mediterranean coast, and north Africa. Although for several centuries Latin was the court language of the eastern empire, Greek was the common tongue, and after Emperor Justinian in the 6th century, it became the official language as well. Indeed, in the eyes of the easterners, Latin became an inferior, barbaric means of communication. Knowledge of Greek enabled the scholars of the eastern empire to read freely in the ancient Athenian philosophical and literary classics and in the Hellenistic writings and scientific treatises.

The new empire benefited from the high levels of commerce long present in the eastern Mediterranean. New blood was drawn into administration and trade as Hellenized Egyptians and Syrians, long excluded from Roman administration, moved to Constantinople and entered the expanding bureaucracy of the Byzantine rulers. The empire faced many foreign enemies, although the pressure was less severe than that provided by the Germanic tribes in the West. It responded by recruiting armies in the Middle East itself, not by relying on barbarian troops. Complex administration around a remote emperor, who was surrounded by elaborate ceremonies, increasingly defined the empire's political style.

Justinian’s Achievements

The early history of the Byzantine empire was marked by a recurrent threat of invasion. Eastern emperors, relying on their local military base plus able generalship by upper-class Greeks, beat off attacks by the Sassanian empire in Persia and by Germanic invaders. Then, in 533 C.E., with the empire's borders reasonably secure, a new emperor, Justinian, tried to reconquer western territory in a last futile effort to restore an empire like that of Rome (see Map 10.1). He was somber, autocratic, and prone to grandiose ideas. A contemporary historian named Procopius described him as “at once villainous and amenable; as people say colloquially, a moron. He was never truthful with anyone, but always guileful in what he said and did, yet easily hoodwinked by any who wanted to deceive him.” The emperor was also heavily influenced by his power-hungry wife Theodora, a courtesan connected with Constantinople's horse-racing world. Theodora stiffened Justinian's resolve in response to popular unrest and pushed the plans for expansion.

Justinian's positive contributions to the Byzantine empire lay in rebuilding Constantinople, ravaged by earlier riots against high taxes, and systematizing the Roman legal code. Extending later Roman architecture, with its addition of domes to earlier classical styles, Justinian's builders created many new structures, the most inspiring of which was the huge new church, the Hagia Sophia, long one of the wonders of the Christian world. (The great church would later become a mosque and is now a museum.) This was an achievement in engineering as well as architecture, for no one had previously been able to build the supports needed for a dome of its size. Justinian's codification of Roman law reached a goal that earlier emperors had sought but not achieved, summing up and reconciling many prior edicts and decisions. Unified law not only reduced confusion but also united and organized the new empire, paralleling the state's bureaucracy. Updated by later emperors, the code ultimately helped spread Roman legal principles in various parts of Europe.
Justinian's military exploits had more ambiguous results. The emperor wanted to recapture the old Roman Empire itself. With the aid of a brilliant general, Belisarius, new gains were made in north Africa and Italy. Justinian's forces made their temporary capital, Ravenna, a key artistic center, embellished by some of the most beautiful Christian mosaics known anywhere in the world (Figure 10.2). But the major Italian holdings were short-lived, unable to withstand Germanic pressure, and north African territory was soon besieged as well.

Furthermore, Justinian's westward ambitions had weakened the empire in its own sphere. Persian forces attacked in the northern Middle East, while new Slavic groups, moving into the Balkans, pressed on another front (Map 10.1). Justinian finally managed to create a new line of defense and even pushed Persian forces back again, but some Middle Eastern territory was lost. Furthermore, all these wars, offensive and defensive alike, created new tax pressures on the government, and these triggered several popular revolts while forcing Justinian to exertions that contributed to his death in 565 C.E.

**Arab Pressure and the Empire's Defenses**

After some setbacks, Justinian's successors began to concentrate on defending the eastern empire itself. Persian advances in the northern Middle East were reversed in the 7th century, and the population was forcibly reconverted to Christianity. The resultant empire, centered in the southern Balkans and the western and central portions of present-day Turkey, was a
far cry from Rome's greatness. However, it was sufficient to amplify a rich Hellenistic culture and blend it more fully with Christianity while advancing Roman achievements in engineering and military tactics as well as law.

The Byzantine empire was also strong enough to withstand the great new threat of the 7th century, the surge of the Arab Muslims, although not without massive losses. By the mid-7th century, the Arabs had built a fleet that challenged Byzantine naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean while repeatedly attacking Constantinople. They quickly swallowed the empire’s remaining provinces along the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean and soon cut into the northern Middle Eastern heartland as well. Arab cultural and commercial influence also affected patterns of life in Constantinople. Byzantine territory was cut back to about half the size of the earlier eastern Roman empire.

The Byzantine empire held out nevertheless. A major siege of the capital in 717–718 C.E. was beaten back, partly because of a new weapon, a kind of napalm called Greek fire (a petroleum, quicklime, and sulfur mixture) that devastated Arab ships. The Arab threat was never removed entirely. Furthermore, wars with the Muslims had added new economic burdens to the empire. Invasions and taxation weakened the position of small farmers and resulted in greater aristocratic estates plus new power for aristocratic generals. The free rural population that had served the empire during its early centuries—providing military recruits and paying the bulk of the taxes—was forced into greater dependence on aristocratic landowners, often losing their land outright. Recurrent peasant risings occurred; one in 932, interestingly, involved a peasant leader posing as an aristocrat defending the people against the state.

These social changes, from the 10th century onward, weakened state revenues and military recruitment. But the empire hung on, supported in part by successful commercial activity including foreign trade. Politically, greater emphasis was given to organizing the army and navy. After the greatest Arab onslaughts had been faced, the empire was run by a dizzying series of weak and strong

**VISUALIZING THE PAST**

**Women and Power in Byzantium**

**THIS MOSAIC, DEVELOPED BETWEEN 1034–1042, PORTRAYS** the Empress Zoë, her consort, and Christ (in the center). Zoë would later rule jointly with her sister Theodora, despite their earlier struggle for power.

**QUESTIONS**

- What evidence does this mosaic provide about the political relationship between Zoë and her husband?
- What does it suggest about the relationship between church and state in Byzantium and about ways religion might be used to bolster political power?
- (Interpreting the haloes is a good start in answering this question.) What sense of history and religion made it reasonable to show Christ between two 11th-century people?

**Istanbul, St. Sophia, Mosaic in the South Tribune: Christ with the Empress Zoë, who is presenting him with a scroll listing her donations to the church, and her consort, Monomachus, who is offering him a purse containing gold coins.**
Bulgaria  Slavic kingdom established in northern portions of Balkan peninsula; constant source of pressure on Byzantine empire; defeated by Emperor Basil II in 1014.

View the Closer Look on MyHistoryLab: A Holy Emperor: Basil II

Byzantine Society and Politics

The Byzantine political system had remarkable similarities to the earlier patterns in China, both serving as important examples of state building. The emperor was held to be ordained by God, head of church as well as state. He appointed church bishops and passed religious as well as secular laws. The power of the state over the church was a key feature of Orthodox Christianity, in contrast to patterns in Western Europe. Elaborate court rituals symbolized the ideals of a divinely inspired, all-powerful ruler, although they often immobilized rulers and inhibited innovative policy.

At key points, women held the imperial throne while maintaining the ceremonial power of the office. The experiences of Empress Theodora (981–1056), namesake of Justinian's powerful wife, illustrate the complex nature of Byzantine politics and the whims of fate that affected women rulers. Daughter of an emperor, Theodora was strong and austere; she refused to marry the imperial heir, who then wed her sister Zoë. Zoë was afraid of Theodora’s influence and had her confined to a convent. A popular rebellion against the new emperor installed Theodora and Zoë jointly (and one assumes uneasily) as empresses. Later, Theodora managed to check unruly nobles and limit bureaucratic corruption, although her severe retaliation against personal enemies brought criticism.

Supplementing the centralized imperial authority was one of history's most elaborate bureaucracies. Trained in Greek classics, philosophy, and science in a secular school system that paralleled church education for the priesthood, Byzantine bureaucrats could be recruited from all social classes. As in China, aristocrats predominated, but talent also counted among this elite of highly educated scholars. Bureaucrats were specialized into various offices, and officials close to the emperor were mainly eunuchs. Provincial governors were appointed from the center and were charged with keeping tabs on military authorities. An elaborate system of spies helped preserve loyalty while creating intense distrust even among friends. It is small wonder that the word byzantine came to refer to complex institutional arrangements. Careful military organization arose as well. Byzantine rulers adapted the later Roman system by recruiting troops locally and rewarding them with grants of land in return for their military service. The land could not be sold, but sons inherited its administration in return for their military service. The land could not be sold, but sons inherited its administration in return for continued military responsibility. Many outsiders, particularly Slavs and Armenian Christians, were recruited for the army in this way. Increasingly, hereditary military leaders assumed regional power, displacing more traditional and better-educated aristocrats. One emperor, Michael II, was a product of this system and was notorious for his hatred of Greek education and his overall personal ignorance.

On the other hand, the military system had obvious advantages in protecting a state recurrently under attack from Muslims of various sorts—Persians, Arabs, and later Turks—as well as nomadic intruders from central Asia. Until the 15th century, the Byzantine empire effectively blocked the path to Europe for most of these groups.

Socially and economically, the empire depended on Constantinople's control over the countryside, with the bureaucracy regulating trade and controlling food prices. Food prices were kept artificially low, to content the numerous urban lower classes, in a system supported largely by taxes on the hard-pressed peasantry. Other cities were modest in size—for example, Athens dwindled—because the focus was on the capital city and its food needs. The empire developed a far-flung trading network with Asia to the east and Russia and Scandinavia to the north. Silk production...

icon An icon is an artistic representation, usually of a religious figure.

emperors. Periods of vigor alternated with seeming decay. Arab pressure continued. Conquest of the island of Crete in the 9th century allowed the Muslims to harass Byzantine shipping in the Mediterranean for several centuries. Slavic kingdoms, especially Bulgaria, periodically pressed Byzantine territory in the Balkans, although at times military success and marriage alliances brought Byzantine control over the feisty Bulgarian kingdom. Thus, while a Bulgarian king in the 10th century took the title of tsar, a Slavic version of the word Caesar, steady Byzantine pressure through war eroded the regional kingdom. In the 11th century, the Byzantine emperor Basil II, known as Bulgaroktonos, or slayer of the Bulgarians, used the empire's wealth to bribe many Bulgarian nobles and generals. He defeated the Bulgarian army in 1014, blinding as many as 15,000 captive soldiers. The sight of this tragedy brought on the Bulgarian king's death. Bulgaria became part of the empire, its aristocracy settling in Constantinople and merging with the leading Greek families.

Briefly, at the end of the 10th century, the Byzantine emperor may have been the most powerful monarch on earth, with a capital city whose rich buildings and abundant popular entertainments awed visitors from western Europe and elsewhere.
expanded in the empire, and various luxury products, including cloth, carpets, and spices, were sent north. This gave the empire a favorable trading position with less sophisticated lands. Only China produced luxury goods of comparable quality. The empire also traded actively with India, the Arabs, and east Asia while receiving simpler products from western Europe and Africa. At the same time, the large merchant class never gained significant political power, in part because of the elaborate network of government controls. In this, Byzantium again resembled China and differed notably from the looser social and political networks of the West, where merchants were gaining greater voice.

Byzantine cultural life centered on the secular traditions of Hellenism, so important in the education of bureaucrats, and on the evolving traditions of Eastern, or Orthodox, Christianity. The Byzantine strength lay in preserving and commenting on past forms more than in developing new ones. Art and architecture were exceptions; a distinct Byzantine style developed fairly early. The adaptation of Roman domed buildings, the elaboration of powerful and richly colored religious mosaics, and a tradition of icon paintings—paintings of saints and other religious figures, often richly ornamented—expressed this artistic impulse and its marriage with Christianity. The icons' blue-and-gold backgrounds set with richly dressed religious figures were meant to represent the unchanging brilliance of heaven.

THE SPLIT BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

10.3 Why did the two major regional versions of Christianity part? How significant was the split?

Byzantine culture and politics, as well as the empire's economic orientation toward Asia and northeastern Europe, helped explain the growing break between its eastern version of Christianity and the western version headed by the pope in Rome. There were many milestones in this rift. Different rituals developed as the Western church translated the Greek Bible into Latin in the 4th century. Later, Byzantine emperors deeply resented papal attempts to loosen state control over the Eastern church to make it conform more fully to their own idea of church-state relations. Contact between the two branches of Christianity trailed off, although neither the Eastern nor Western church cared to make a definitive break. The Eastern church acknowledged the pope as first among equals, but papal directives had no hold in the Byzantine church, where state control loomed larger. Religious art conveyed different styles and beliefs, as Figures 10.4 and 10.5 suggest. Even monastic movements operated according to different rules.

The Schism

Then, in 1054, an ambitious church patriarch in Constantinople raised a host of issues, including a quarrel over what kind of bread to use for the celebration of Christ's last supper in the church liturgy. The bread quarrel was an old one, relating to ritual use of bread in Christ's day, and whether communion bread must be baked without yeast. The patriarch also attacked the Roman Catholic practice, developed some centuries earlier, of insisting on celibacy for its priests; Eastern Orthodox priests could marry. Delegations of the two churches discussed these disputes, but this led only to new bitterness. The Roman pope finally excommunicated the patriarch and his followers, banishing them from
FIGURE 10.4 Just as theologians through the centuries have worked to understand Christ's message, so too have artists struggled to capture his image. This powerful mosaic of Christ at the Church of Chora in Istanbul was created in the first part of the 14th century. Notice the difference between this image and the images of Christ common in Western Christianity, which place more emphasis on suffering and less on divine majesty.

FIGURE 10.5 The Byzantine empire developed a distinctively stylized religious art, adapted from earlier Roman painting styles and conveying the solemnity of the holy figures of the faith. This illustration from a 14th-century manuscript features the holy women at the sepulchre of Christ.

Christian fellowship and the sacraments. The patriarch responded by excommunicating all Roman Catholics. Thus, the split, or schism, between the Roman Catholic church and Eastern Orthodoxy—the Byzantine or Greek, as well as the Russian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, and others—became formal and has endured to this day. A late-12th-century church patriarch in Constantinople even argued that Muslim rule would be preferable to that of the pope: "For if I am subject to the Muslim, at least he will not force me to share his faith. But if I have to be under the Frankish rule and united with the Roman Church, I may have to separate myself from God."

The split between the Eastern and Western churches fell short of complete divorce. A common Christianity with many shared or revived classical traditions and frequent commercial and cultural contacts continued to enliven the relationship between the two European civilizations. The division did reflect the different patterns of development the two civilizations followed during the postclassical millennium. Not only separate artistic forms and rituals, but also different ideas about the role of scholarship separated the two regions—with eastern Europe developing a less elaborate philosophical tradition in relation to religion. Differences in the role of the state in religious affairs may have contributed not just to divisions at this time, but to later distinctions in governments' claims to power between the two main European regions.

The Empire's Decline

Shortly after the split between the Eastern and Western churches, the Byzantine empire entered a long period of decline (Map 10.2). Turkish invaders who had converted to Islam in central Asia began to press on its eastern borders, having already gained increasing influence in the Muslim caliphate. In
the late 11th century, Turkish troops, the Seljuks, seized almost all the Asiatic provinces of the empire, thus cutting off the most prosperous sources of tax revenue and the territories that had supplied most of the empire's food. The Byzantine emperor lost the battle of Manzikert in 1071, his larger army was annihilated, and the empire never recovered. It staggered along for another four centuries, but its doom, at least as a significant power, was sealed. The creation of new, independent Slavic kingdoms in the Balkans, such as Serbia, showed the empire's diminished power.

Eastern emperors appealed to Western leaders for help against the Turks, but their requests were largely ignored. Although the requests helped motivate Western Crusades to the Holy Land, this did not help the Byzantines. At the same time, Italian cities, blessed with powerful navies, gained increasing advantages in Constantinople, such as special trading privileges—a sign of the shift in power between East and West. Byzantium's role in world trade now attracted Western—particularly, Italian—appetites. One Crusade, in 1204, ostensibly set up to conquer the Holy Land from the Muslims, actually turned against Byzantium. Led by greedy Venetian merchants, the Crusade attacked and conquered Constantinople, briefly unseating the emperor and weakening the whole imperial structure. But the West was not yet powerful enough to hold this ground, and a small Byzantine empire was restored, able through careful diplomacy to survive for another two centuries.

Turkish settlements pressed ever closer to Constantinople in the northern Middle East—in the area that is now Turkey—and finally, in 1453, a Turkish sultan brought a powerful army, equipped with artillery purchased from Hungary, against the city, which fell after two months. By 1461, the Turks had conquered remaining pockets of Byzantine control, including most of the Balkans, bringing Islamic power farther into eastern Europe than ever before. The great eastern empire was no more.

MAP 10.2 The Byzantine Empire, 1000–1100 The Byzantine empire went from a major to a minor power in the period portrayed on this map. After the Turkish defeat at Manzikert in 1071, the Byzantines maintained effective control of only a small fringe of Anatolia. In the Balkans, new Serbian, Bulgarian, and Hungarian states grew powerful, despite the Byzantines' claim to control of the region.
The fall of Byzantium was one of the great events in world history, and we will deal with its impact in several later chapters. It was a vital event because the Byzantine empire had been so durable and important, anchoring a vital corner of the Mediterranean and an important segment of world trade even amid the rapid surge of Islam. The empire's commercial contacts and its ability to preserve and spread classical and Christian learning made it a vital unit throughout the postclassical period. After its demise, its legacy continued to affect other societies, including the new Ottoman empire.

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Eastern and Western Europe: The Problem of Boundaries

The problem of boundaries between civilizations and even between states has long attracted the attention of scholars. The continuing evolution of nation states and their often self-serving desire to define themselves within larger civilizational boundaries greatly complicates the task of deciding where one civilization ends and another begins.

Defining the territory of the two related civilizations that developed in Europe is particularly difficult. A number of states sat, and still sit, on the borders of the two civilizations, sharing some characteristics of each. Furthermore, political disputes and national-ist attachments, fierce in this border territory of east central Europe during the past two centuries, make territorial definitions an emotional issue. So the question of defining Europe's civilizations is a particularly thorny case of a larger problem.

If a civilization is defined simply by its mainstream culture, then eastern and western Europe in the postclassical period divide logically according to Orthodox and Catholic territories (and use of the Cyrillic and Greek or of the Latin alphabet). By this reckoning, Poland, the Czech areas, and the Baltic states (these latter did not convert to Catholicism until the 14th century) are western, and Hungary is largely so. South Slavs are mainly but not entirely Orthodox. Russia and Ukraine are decidedly Orthodox in tradition. Religion matters. Poland and other Catholic regions have long maintained much more active ties with western Europe than Russia has. At the end of the postclassical period, a Czech religious dissenter, Jan Hus, even foreshadowed the later Protestant Reformation in his attacks on the Catholic church.

Politically, the case is more complicated. Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania formed large regional kingdoms at various times during and after the postclassical period. But these kingdoms were very loosely organized, much more so than the feudal monarchies that were developing in western Europe. Exceptionally large aristocracies in Poland and Hungary (by western or by Russian standards) helped limit these states.

Trade patterns also did not closely unite Poland or Hungary with western Europe until much later, when the two regions were clearly different in economic structure. Also, Polish and Hungarian societies often shared more features with Russia than with western Europe.

Russian expansion later pulled parts of eastern Europe, including Poland, into its orbit, although it never eliminated strong cultural identities. It is also important to remember that borders can change. The Mongol invasions that swept through Russia also conquered Poland and Hungary, but the armies did not stay there. Part of the Ukraine was also free from direct Mongol control, which helped differentiate it from Russia proper. For two centuries, at the end of the postclassical period, the divisions within eastern Europe intensified. Since 1989, many eastern European countries have again achieved full independence from Russia, and they want to claim their distinctive pasts. Not an easy border area to characterize in terms of a single civilization, east central Europe has also been a victim of many conquests interspersed with periods of proud independence.

QUESTIONS

- What were the main characteristics of Russian civilization as it first emerged in the postclassical period?
- In what ways did Poland, Hungary, and the Czech lands differ from these characteristics?
- Are there other civilization border areas, in the postclassical period or later, that are similarly difficult to define because of their position between two other areas?
THE SPREAD OF CIVILIZATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

10.4 What were the main commonalities among the societies that developed in eastern Europe during the postclassical period?

Long before the Byzantine decline after the 11th century, the empire had been the source of a new northward surge of Christianity. Orthodox missionaries sent from Constantinople busily converted most people in the Balkans to their version of Christianity, and some other trappings of Byzantine culture came in their wake. In 864, the Byzantine government sent the missionaries Cyril and Methodius to the territory that is now the Czech and Slovak republics. Here the venture failed, in that Roman Catholic missionaries were more successful. But Cyril and Methodius continued their efforts in the Balkans and in southern Russia, where their ability to speak the Slavic language greatly aided their efforts. The two missionaries devised a written script for this language, derived from Greek letters; to this day, the Slavic alphabet is known as Cyrillic. Thus, the possibility of literature and some literacy developed in eastern Europe along with Christianity, well beyond the political borders of Byzantium. Byzantine missionaries were quite willing to have local languages used in church services—another contrast with western Catholicism, which insisted on church Latin.

The East Central Borderlands

Eastern missionaries did not monopolize the borderlands of eastern Europe. Roman Catholicism and the Latin alphabet prevailed not only in the Czech area but also in most of Hungary (which was taken over in the 9th century by a Turkic people, the Magyars) and in Poland. Much of this region would long be an area of competition between eastern and western political and intellectual models. During the centuries after the conversion to Christianity, this stretch of eastern Europe north of the Balkans was organized in a series of regional monarchies, loosely governed amid a powerful, land­owning aristocracy. The kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia, and Lithuania easily surpassed most western kingdoms in territory. This was also a moderately active area for trade and industry. For example, ironworking was more developed than in the West until the 12th century.

Eastern Europe during these centuries also received an important influx of Jews, who were migrating away from the Middle East but also fleeing intolerance in western Europe. Poland gained the largest single concentration of Jews. Eastern Europe's Jews, largely barred from agriculture and often resented by the Christian majority, gained strength in local commerce while maintaining their own religious and cultural traditions. A strong emphasis on extensive education and literacy, although primarily for males, distinguished Jewish culture not only from the rest of eastern Europe but also from most other societies in the world at this time.

THE EMERGENCE OF KIEVAN RUS’

10.5 What kinds of imitation affected Russia's development in the postclassical period?

Russia shared many features with the rest of northeastern Europe before the 15th century. As in much of eastern Europe, the centuries of Byzantine influence were an important formative period that would influence later developments, even as Russia became more important. Slavic peoples had moved into the sweeping plains of Russia and eastern Europe from an Asian homeland during the time of the Roman Empire (Map 10.3). They mixed with and incorporated some earlier inhabitants and some additional invaders, such as the Bulgarians, who adopted Slavic language and customs. The Slavs already used iron, and they extended agriculture in the rich soils of what is now Ukraine and western Russia. The Slavs maintained an animist religion with gods for the sun, thunder, wind, and fire. The early Russians also had a rich tradition of folk music and oral legends, and they developed some very loose regional kingdoms.
10.1

Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: Ibn Fadlan's Account of the Rus'

10.2

Kiev
Trade city in southern Russia established by Scandinavian traders in 9th century; became focal point for kingdom of Russia that flourished to 12th century.

Rurik
Legendary Scandinavian, regarded as founder of the first kingdom of Russia based in Kiev in 855 C.E.

MAP 10.3 East European Kingdoms and Slavic Expansion c. 1000
Beginning around the 5th century C.E., the Slavs moved in all directions from their lands around the Pripyet River in what is today Ukraine and Belarus. Their migrations took them from the Baltic Sea to the Oder River and down to the Adriatic and Aegean seas. The arrival of the Hungarians in the 9th and 10th centuries prevented the Slavs from unifying. The arrival of the Hungarians in the 9th and 10th centuries complicated the Slavic holdings, tending to separate Russians and Slavs in the Balkans. Still, the various Slavic peoples dominated a vast territory in eastern Europe.

New Patterns of Trade
During the 6th and 7th centuries, traders from Scandinavia began to work through the Slavic lands, moving along the great rivers of western Russia, which run south to north, particularly the Dnieper (DNEE-puhr). Map 10.3 shows the route that led from Scandinavia to Byzantium, and the Russian territory that began to coalesce around it. Through this route the Norse traders were able to reach the Byzantine empire, and a regular, flourishing trade developed between Scandinavia and Constantinople. Luxury products from Byzantium and the Arab world traveled north in return for furs and other crude products. The Scandinavian traders, militarily superior to the Slavs, gradually set up some governments along their trade route, particularly in the city of Kiev. A monarchy emerged, and according to legend a man named Rurik, a native of Denmark, became the first prince of what came

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to be called Kievan Rus' (KEE-eh-vehn ROOS) about 855 C.E. This principality, though still loosely organized through alliances with regional, landed aristocrats, flourished until the 12th century. It was at this time that the word Russia was coined, possibly from a Greek word for “red,” for the hair color of many of the Norse traders.

Contacts between Kievan Rus' and Byzantium extended steadily. Kiev, centrally located, became a prosperous trading center, and from there many Russians visited Constantinople. This was the context in which Prince Vladimir I, a Rurik descendant who ruled from 980 to 1015, took the step of converting to Christianity, not only in his own name but on behalf of all his people. Having made his decision, Vladimir organized mass baptisms for his subjects, forcing conversions by military pressure. Early church leaders were imported from Byzantium, and they helped train a literate Russian priesthood. As in Byzantium, the king characteristically controlled major appointments, and a separate Russian Orthodox church soon developed.

As Kievan Rus' became Christian, it was the largest single state in Europe, although highly decentralized. Rurik's descendants managed for some time to avoid damaging battles over succession to the throne. Following Byzantine example, they issued a formal law code that reduced the severity of traditional punishments and replaced community vendettas with state-run courts, at least in principle. The last of the great Kievan princes, Yaroslav, issued the legal codification while building many churches and arranging the translation of religious literature from Greek to Slavic.

### Russia Turns to Christianity

This document from a monk’s chronicle, describing King Vladimir’s conversion policy, indicates what was officially believed about the power of Russian princes, Russian social structure, and the relationship between Christianity and earlier animism. These official claims are important, but they may not reflect the whole reality of this important transition in Russian history. Here is a classic case of the need to understand a particular mindset and genre of writing, to understand why particular explanations are offered without accepting their reality.

For this time the Russes were ignorant pagans. The devil rejoiced thereat, for he did not know that his ruin was approaching. He was so eager to destroy the Christian people, yet he was expelled by the true cross even from these very lands. . . . Vladimir was visited by Bulgars of the Mohammedan faith. . . . [He] listened to them for he was fond of women and indulgence, regarding which he heard with pleasure. But . . . abstinence from pork and wine were disagreeable to him. “Drinking,” said he, “is the joy of the Russes. We cannot exist without that pleasure.”[Russian envoys sent to Constantinople were astonished by the beauty of the churches and the chanting], and in their wonder praised the Greek ceremonial. . . .

[Later, Vladimir was suffering from blindness; a Byzantine bishop baptized him] and as the bishop laid his hand upon him, he straightway recovered his sight. Upon experiencing this miraculous cure, Vladimir glorified God, saying, “I have now perceived the one true God.” When his followers beheld this miracle, many of them were also baptized. . . . Thereafter Vladimir sent heralds throughout the whole city to proclaim that if any inhabitant, rich or poor, did not betake himself to the river [for mass baptism] he would risk the Prince's displeasure. When the people heard these words, they wept for joy and exclaimed in their enthusiasm, “If this were not good, the Prince and his nobles would not have accepted it.” . . . There was joy in heaven and upon earth to behold so many souls saved. But the devil groaned, lamenting, “Woe is me. How am I driven out hence . . . my reign in these regions is at an end.” . . .

He [Vladimir] ordered that wooden churches should be built and established where [pagan] idols have previously stood. He founded the Church of Saint Basil on the hill where the idol of Perun and the other images had been set, and where the prince and the people had offered their sacrifices. He began to found churches, to assign priests throughout the cities and towns, and to bring people in for baptism from all towns and villages. He began to take the children of the best families and send them for instruction from books.

### QUESTIONS

- In what ways might the account be simplistic in describing royal powers and popular response?
- What explanations does this religious chronicler offer for the conversion of Russians to Christianity?
- Which of the explanations are most likely, and which are the results of some kind of bias?
- What kind of church-state relationship did this kind of conversion predict?
Institutions and Culture in Kievan Rus'

Kievan Rus’ borrowed much from Byzantium, but it was in no position to replicate major institutions such as the bureaucracy or an elaborate educational system. Major princes were attracted to Byzantine ceremonial and luxury and to the concept (if not yet the reality) that a central ruler should have wide powers. Many characteristics of Orthodox Christianity gradually penetrated Russian culture. Fervent devotion to the power of God and to many eastern saints helped organize worship. Churches were ornate, filled with icons and the sweet smell of incense. A monastic movement developed that stressed prayer and charity. Traditional practices, such as polygamy, gradually yielded to the Christian practice of monogamy. The emphasis on almsgiving long described the sense of obligation felt by wealthy Russians toward the poor.

The Russian literature that developed, which used the Cyrillic alphabet, featured chronicles that described a mixture of religious and royal events and showered praises on the saints and the power of God. Disasters were seen as expressions of the just wrath of God against human wickedness, and success in war followed from the aid of God and the saints in the name of Russia and the Orthodox faith. This tone also was common in western Christian writing during these centuries, but in Kievan Rus’ it monopolized formal culture; a distinct philosophical or scientific current did not emerge in the postclassical period.

Russian and Ukrainian art focused on the religious also, with icon painting and illuminated religious manuscripts becoming a Kievan specialty. Orthodox churches, built in the form of a cross surmounted by a dome, similarly aped Byzantine models, although the building materials often were wood rather than stone. Domed structures adapted Byzantine themes to Russian conditions, in what proved to be a durable regional style. Religious art and music were rivaled by popular entertainments in the oral tradition, which combined music, street performances, and some theater. The Russian church unsuccessfully tried to suppress these forms, regarding them as pagan.

Just as Russia's religious culture developed separately from western Europe's, Russian social and economic patterns took distinctive shape. Russian peasants were fairly free farmers, although an aristocratic landlord class existed. Russian aristocrats, called boyars, had less political power than their counterparts in western Europe, although the Kievan princes had to negotiate with them.

For all its distinctiveness, Russia was not unaware of other parts of Europe. The greatest ruler of the period, Yaroslav the Wise (1019–1054), used marriages to create ties. He arranged over 30 marriages with central European royalty, including 11 with Germany, pressing six Russian princes to take German wives while inducing five German nobles to accept Russian brides. Even here, however, Yaroslav kept his main focus on Byzantium, promoting Byzantine styles in the great cathedral of Kiev and using Byzantine example as the basis for Russia's first law code.

Kiev

Kiev (or Kyiv, in Ukrainian) was the leading city of Kievan Rus’, a key center for north–south trade from Scandinavia to the Middle East. Novgorod was its only main competitor along this route. The city had been founded earlier, on the site of scattered Slavic settlements. The kings who began to carve out the first Russian state adopted the city as their capital. The location was good: The main part of the city could be built on a substantial hill—as with many European cities at the time, defense against raids was a key concern. Along with city walls, a hilltop location helped. But at the base of the hill flowed the Dnieper River, a substantial artery that would facilitate trade.

Kiev quickly became a religious center. In 988, Vladimir required a mass baptism of the city's citizens in the local river, converting them to Christianity. During the following two centuries, Kiev witnessed a massive amount of church building, including the great cathedral of Saint Sophia and also a major monastery complex in the caves of Lavra. As was true of most Christian cities in the postclassical period, Kiev was dominated by religious architecture. By 1200 the city boasted 400 churches, or approximately one per 130 inhabitants, obviously a massive investment.

The city also contained eight markets, however, and an array of economic activities. In 1200 the city was the largest in Europe, with 50,000 people—by comparison, London had but 20,000 at the same point. Travelers called the city a “charming gem,” and one German visitor compared it to Constantinople. But the comparison was in fact misleading: The cities of Europe outside the Byzantine empire remained tiny by Asian standards; Constantinople itself had 350,000 people at this point.
Kiev hit hard times after 1200. It was raided many times by turbulent Russian princes, and then it fell to Mongol attack. Recovery would come slowly.

Kievan Decline

The Kievan principality began to fade in the 12th century. Rival princes set up regional governments, and the royal family often squabbled over succession to the throne. Invaders from Asia whittled at Russian territory. The rapid decline of Byzantium reduced Russian trade and wealth, for the kingdom had always depended heavily on the greater prosperity and sophisticated manufacturing of its southern neighbor. The final blow in this first chapter of Russian history came in 1237–1238 and 1240–1241, when two invasions by Mongols from central Asia moved through Russia and into other parts of eastern Europe. The initial Mongol intent was to add the whole of Europe to their growing empire. The Mongols easily captured the major Russian cities, but they did not penetrate much farther west because of political difficulties in their Asian homeland. Called Tatars in the Russian tradition (from a Turkish word), the invaders were quickly despised but also feared—"the accursed raw-eating Tatars," as one chronicle put it.

For over two centuries much of Russia remained under Tatar control. This control further separated the dynamic of Russian history from that of western Europe. Russian literature languished under Tatar supervision. Trade lapsed in western Russia, and the vigorous north–south commerce of the Kievan period never returned. At the same time, loose Tatar supervision did not destroy Russian Christianity or a native Russian aristocratic class. As long as tribute was paid, Tatar overlords left day-to-day Russian affairs alone. Thus, when Tatar control was finally forced out in the second half of the 15th century, a Russian cultural and political tradition could reemerge, serving as a partial basis for the further, fuller development of Russian society.

Russian leaders retained an active memory of the glories of Byzantium. When Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, just as Russia was beginning to assert its independence from the Tatars, it was logical to claim that the mantle of east European leadership had fallen on Russia. A monk, currying favor, wrote the Russian king in 1511 that whereas heresy had destroyed the first Roman Empire and the Turks had cut down the second, Byzantium—a "third, new Rome" under the king's "mighty rule"—"sends out the Orthodox Christian faith to the ends of the earth and shines more brightly than the sun." According to the monk, "Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and there will be no fourth." This sense of an eastern Christian mission, inspiring a Russian resurgence, was just one result of this complicated formative period in the emergence of a separate European civilization in the Slavic lands.

The End of an Era in Eastern Europe

With Byzantium and Russia both under siege, eastern European civilization fell on hard times at the end of the postclassical era. These difficulties confirmed the largely separate trajectories of western and eastern Europe. Western Europe remained free from outside control and, despite some new problems, maintained a clearer vigor in politics, economy, and culture. When eastern Europe did reemerge, it was at some disadvantage to western Europe in terms of power and economic and cultural sophistication—a very different balance from that of the glory days of Byzantium and the vigor of Kievan Russia.

Tatar invasion and Byzantine collapse were profoundly disruptive. Key features of Kievan social structure disappeared in the later development of imperial Russia. Yet continuity was not entirely lost. Not only Christianity but also eastern European assumptions about political rulers and church–state relations and the pride in a lively artistic culture served as organizing threads when Russia and other Slavic societies turned to rebuilding.
Global Connections and Critical Themes

EASTERN EUROPE AND THE WORLD

The Byzantine empire and eastern Europe more generally participated actively in forging new economic connections. Byzantine trade was a central part of the transregional trading network, bringing links to Arab traders and wider opportunities in Asia as well as the Mediterranean. Kievan Rus' channeled trade from the Baltic to Constantinople, helping to link northern Europe to the larger network as well. The number of Arab coins formed along the trade routes, all the way to Scandinavia, indicates the key links.

Eastern Europe served also as a stage for major cultural change and connection. The spread of Christianity, but the rivalry between the two main versions of Christianity, were important at the time and subsequently.

State building was another obvious feature. The Byzantine state was carefully organized, in part because of military challenges in the region. Russian and other Slavic leaders were aware of the Byzantine example, but the kingdoms they created were more loosely organized.

The vitality of eastern Europe unquestionably declined during the final centuries of the postclassical era, in part because of new weaknesses in the Byzantine Empire. Under the Mongol conquest, Russia became more isolated, raising questions about what kind of contacts it would seek when, by the 15th century, it began to regain greater independence of action.

Further Readings


Critical Thinking Questions

1. How does comparison help identify key features of eastern Europe? What were the main differences and similarities between Orthodox and Catholic (Western) Christianity?

2. How does Russian development compare with other major cases of imitation and contact during the postclassical centuries—for example, with Japanese borrowings from China?

3. What were the main changes and continuities, in the eastern Mediterranean, between patterns during the Roman empire and patterns in the postclassical period?

4. With a focus on causation, what are some of the explanations for the growing weakness of the Byzantine empire in the centuries before 1450?