

The Byzantine Empire: Introduction

While the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 AD, the Eastern Empire, centered on the city of Constantinople, survived and thrived. Over time, influenced by its Greek heritage, Orthodox Christianity, and its Middle Eastern and Eastern European neighbors, the culture of the Eastern Roman Empire transformed. Greek replaced Latin as the language of the empire, and as Christianity became more important in daily life, the empire had a sometimes-uncomfortable memory of its pagan Roman past. Still, the people of the empire, throughout its history, called themselves Romans—*Rhomaioi*—and called their empire the Empire of the Romans. After the empire fell in 1453, Western scholars began calling it the “Byzantine Empire” to emphasize its differences from the earlier Latin-speaking Roman Empire centered on Rome, and by the 19th century this term had become standard among historians.

The term “Byzantine” was also useful to the many Western European states that claimed to be the true successors of the Roman Empire, in that it was used to delegitimize the claims of the Byzantines as true Romans. In modern times, the term “Byzantine” has also come to have a pejorative sense, used to describe things that are overly complex or arcane. “Byzantine diplomacy” has come to mean excess use of trickery and behind-the-scenes manipulation. These are all based on medieval stereotypes about the Byzantine Empire that developed as Western Europeans came in contact with the Byzantines and were perplexed by the more structured government of the Byzantines; they also found the Byzantine preference for diplomacy and subterfuge over warfare to be unmanly.

Despite the fact that the term “Byzantine” is a modern convention and has negative connotations, we will use this term throughout the following readings because the meaning of the term is clear and commonly accepted in modern scholarship. It is also more concise than “Eastern Roman” or “Medieval Roman.” We must be cognizant of the baggage that the term “Byzantine” carries, but it is still a useful term. The “Byzantine Empire” denotes the medieval empire centered on Constantinople in which Christianity and Greek language and heritage dominated daily life.