Heraclius and the Byzantine Theme System

Justinian’s campaign to re-establish the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean came at a high cost. Diverting resources to this effort and heavily increasing taxes in the process, left the eastern borders of the empire vulnerable. The Persians, led by the Sassanid Dynasty, rivaled the Romans in trade and were a constant threat at the eastern borders. Diplomacy, territorial concessions, and bribes, which had successfully held the Persians at bay, were becoming less and less of an option in such an economic climate. The eastern empire faced another threat, too: the Avars and the Slavs. Migrating south of the Danube River into the Balkans, the Avars mixed with groups of Slavs and Bulgars in the region between the Danube and Black Sea. By 600, these groups were present from the Danube to Greece.

Beginning in 602, the Persian king, Chosroes II, turned his sights on eastern Roman provinces. In 614, the Persians captured the city of Antioch in Syria, which was quickly followed by the capture of Jerusalem in Palestine. It was from Jerusalem that the Persians took one of the holiest relics in Christianity: a fragment of the cross upon which Christians believed Jesus was crucified, or the True Cross. Set on recovering this relic and avenging the empire’s losses, in 622 Emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641) decided to leave Constantinople in the care of the Patriarch, the highest church official in the eastern empire, and head into Persian lands with his army. In 626, the Persians joined with the Avars to launch a joint attack on Constantinople in Heraclius’s absence, but the city, protected by massive walls, held out. Two years later, Heraclius defeated the Persian King Chosroes II in Persian territory, reclaiming the lost provinces and the relic of the True Cross. He also subdued the Avars on the Balkan Peninsula, making the Avar kingdom a vassal state.

Although victorious, the battles against the Persians and Avars left the empire in a weakened state precisely when a new invader arrived at its borders: Arab Muslims. Spreading the faith and revelations of the prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632), Islamic forces swept through the Arabian Peninsula following the death of Muhammad in 632 and attacked Palestine and Syria, subduing both provinces. In 641 they captured Egypt and pushed across North Africa by the beginning of the eighth century. Along the way, they conquered all of Persia, completing the conquest by 651. At the end of the seventh century and again in 717, Islamic forces besieged Constantinople. The empire fought back with “Greek fire,” explosives projected from tubes creating blazes on the water surface and destroying ships.

Constant wars, pressures on the borders, and the loss of some of the wealthiest cities and provinces, including Syria and Egypt, compelled emperors to reorganize the empire once again. Although historians disagree about which emperor initiated it, by the year 650 the provinces were reorganized into defensive military districts called themes. A general, a strategos, appointed by the emperor who governed with full military and civil control, governed each theme. The strategos maintained his own army, attracting soldiers with the lure of land, resulting in soldiers’ estates. He also drew ranks from the
local population, or peasantry, with the male head of a family offering military service while the remainder of the family farmed small plots of land. The focus of life shifted from the markets and bustle of the cities to the home in the country, church, and agriculture, especially when land became a form of payment to soldiers. Most decisions were made locally between farmers, who interacted less with imperial officials than they did with members of monasteries. Although themes developed regional traditions and loyalties and gained greater autonomy with time, especially through their armies, the key Roman institutions—laws, taxes, and the emperor—remained in place.