The Dark Ages

Although the Byzantines successfully defeated the Persians in 628 and subdued the Avars, the remainder of the seventh century and most of the eighth century was marked by renewed invasions and a contraction of the empire. This period, referred to as the Dark Ages because of the seeming loss of cultural life in the cities, saw a retreat from urban life. The center of social, economic, and cultural activity shifted from the urban marketplace, imperial bureaucracy, and town squares to the countryside, agriculture, and the local church. The wars with the Persians exhausted the military and financial resources of the empire, leaving it vulnerable to a rising new power: Arab Muslims. Arab forces posed a major threat to Byzantine security. They moved on the wealthiest provinces in the east, conquering Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The loss of these provinces, combined with the growing threat and assaults of a strong Bulgarian state north of the Danube River, resulted in a reorganization of the Byzantine Empire into themes, or defensive military districts. These districts, which consisted of an army and the area in which it resided, were charged with staving off invaders. In the period immediately following Heraclius (r. 610-641), any attempt to reconquer regions that had fallen under Arabic control had to be launched from somewhere other than Asia Minor. The next emperor, Constans II (r. 641-668), Heraclius’s grandson, did just that. Perhaps taking his cue from his grandfather, who also departed from Constantinople, Constans II decided that the best way to fight off Arabic invasion was to prevent Islamic forces from taking any more lands in the West. In 663, Constans II arrived in Italy, battling first with the Lombards, and then moved to Sicily to launch his operations into North Africa, successfully recapturing Carthage. In 668, however, Constans II was assassinated. His son, Constantine IV (r. 668-685), ascended to the throne. It was during his reign that Arab forces besieged Constantinople in 671 but to no avail. Byzantine success in defending its capital city resulted in Arabic retreat from Rhodes and Cyprus, and a treaty granting the Byzantines tribute in the form of coin, slaves, and horses. Constantine IV went on to repel attacks by the Slavs, who were increasingly supported by a rising Bulgarian state, between 675 and 681.

Although the Slavs, Bulgarians, and Arabs would continue to pose problems and threats to the Byzantine Empire, with the ascendency of Constantine IV’s son, Justinian II, who began his reign in 685, the largest issues Byzantines faced were internal. First, Justinian II’s reign was discontinuous. He was driven from the throne in 695 only to return again to rule between 705-711 with two claimants to the throne ruling in the years between. The confusion and chaos did not end until Leo III came to the throne (r. 717-741). Leo III, however, launched the empire into internal strife on a whole new level, bringing it into conflict with interests in the West, most notably, the Christian Church in the West. Leo III’s 730 edict ordering the removal and destruction of religious images, or icons, in churches, and his claim to administrative and priestly authority in the Christian Church inspired numerous revolts and set many imperial subjects, especially members of monasteries and the bishop of Rome, Pope Gregory II, against him. The issue raged on through Constantine V’s reign (741-775), finally coming to a shaky
conclusion, at least on paper, with the Seventh Ecumenical Council on 787, in which the ban on icons was lifted. However, all was not well in the empire. The person largely responsible for initiating this Council was the wife of Leo IV, Irene. Irene dominated imperial politics between 780-802, ruling in her own, yet contested, right during many of these years.

Irene hailed from a noble Athenian family known for its resistance to the prohibition on religious images. She took over the administration of the empire when her son, Constantine VI, ascended to the throne in 780 at the young age of ten. In her commitment to restoring religious images, she dismissed leading military commanders and replaced them with men who shared her commitment. When a revolt broke out in reaction to this, she responded with more dismissals. While Irene successfully launched an attack to reconquer Hellas and the Peloponnesus from the Slavs and convened the Council that reversed the prohibition on icons, her reign was marked by intensified internal strife. To begin with, her claim to rule in her own right was not easily accepted, especially by the leading figures in the West such as Charlemagne, King of the Franks and newly anointed Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III. Through continuous negotiation and contact with Charlemagne, Irene was able to stave off any major direct confrontation, at least for the moment. Her exclusion of her son from political life, however, was another matter. In 790, when Constantine VI was twenty-one, Irene uncovered a plot that aimed to banish her and place her son in power. She responded by having her son locked away and demanding the military swear an oath of loyalty to her. The troops revolted, freed Constantine VI, and sent Irene into exile, but her exile did not last. Within two years, Constantine VI recalled his mother. Constantine VI was involved in a scandal of secret divorce from his first wife and an illicit affair with the woman he took as his second wife, Theodota. Irene used the scandal to form an opposition party. The party captured Constantine VI and his eyes were put out, dying shortly afterward. Her victory, however, was short lived. In 802, a new emperor was crowned, Nicephorus I (r. 802-811), and Irene was expelled to the island of Lesbos, from which she would not return. She died the following year.