

Byzantine Collapse

While the city of Constantinople—the heart and soul of Byzantine culture—would remain in Byzantine hands until 1453, the empire as a whole began to collapse with the death of Basil II. Basil II was the last of the line of strong military and administrative leaders. Under his rule the empire was expanding once again. He capitalized on his military victories, especially those over the Bulgarians, and his firm grip on the army to institute internal reforms. In an effort to ease the burden of the small landholder, Basil II promulgated a contentious tax law to curb the growing power of the landowning elite. The law decreed that the large landholders had to make up any tax deficit out of their own pockets, by threat of eviction by imperial troops. This move exasperated the already present anti-military sentiment held by many members of the civil aristocracy. Lacking the same military might and administrative aptitude, Basil II's successors faced political division at home, military losses in newly reconquered regions, and a final breakdown in relations with the west. In the period between Basil II's death in 1025 and the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, the Byzantines lost their holdings in southern Italy to the Normans, confronted religious schism with the church in Rome, and lost control of Asia Minor to a new powerful Islamic force: the Seljuk Turks. After the Battle of Manzikert, the empire would consist of Constantinople and the areas immediately surrounding it. Byzantium would never recover.

The growing split between the civil aristocracy and the military aristocracy had a marked influence on the fall of Byzantine dominance. When the aging brother of Basil II, Constantine VIII, ascended to the throne in 1025 at age sixty-five, powerful military commanders vied for power, especially in light of the fact Constantine VIII had no male heir. The civil aristocracy, who filled the bureaucracy inside the walls of Constantinople, was also aware of this fact. Disparaging the lack of culture of their military counterparts, they negotiated to have one of their own, the Mayor of Constantinople, to become the husband of Constantine VIII's daughter, Zoe, and reign as Romanus III (1028-1034). When Romanus III was found dead six years later, Zoe married his brother, Michael IV (1034-1041). A year before the death of Michael IV, the newly subdued Bulgarians rose in revolt over a change in the tax structure, which Basil II carefully negotiated when he conquered them. The Bulgarians defeated Byzantine forces and moved into Greece, but the Byzantines caught up with them and overcame the Bulgarian armies. When Michael IV died in 1041, Zoe married yet another member of the civil aristocracy, Constantine IX (1042-1055).

It was during the reign of Constantine IX that the fragile relations between east and west broke down. The break came in the form of religious schism. There had long been tension between the Christian Church in the west, centered at Rome and headed by the pope, and the Christian Church in the east, which became increasingly concentrated in and through the patriarch of Constantinople. The largest issue for many years was who had higher status: Rome or Constantinople? Rome most certainly had the stronger claim, but the Council of Chalcedon in 451 put Constantinople on par with the bishoprics

of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, all of which could claim what Constantinople could not: apostolic succession. Nevertheless, this was never fully accepted in the west, just as the primacy of Rome was never fully accepted in the east. The rise of strong secular powers in the west further complicated matters. It was through the growing ties between the pope in Rome and secular rulers—first the Frankish kings and later the kings of the Ottonian line in the Germanies, symbolized by popes crowning and anointing these kings as “Emperor of the Romans”—that the seed of the doctrinal controversy that permanently split the Christian church took root. The doctrinal issue concerned where the Holy Spirit fit into the nature of the Trinity. Did the Holy Spirit proceed *only* from the Father, as was decided at the Council of Nicaea in 325? Or did the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father *and* the Son, as the western church accepted at the Council of Frankfort in 794? Charlemagne called this Council and enforced the doctrine of procession from both the Father and the Son in his empire. Beginning in the mid-tenth century, the Ottonian emperors, who increasingly incorporated the auspices of the church and papacy into their rule, did the same. In 1043, Constantine IX appointed Michael Cerularius as Patriarch of Constantinople. Disturbed by the presence of western, or Latin elements of worship associated with the church and pope in Rome in some Byzantine holdings, Cerularius made it his mission to enforce orthodoxy, or correct worship and doctrine as defined by the Christian councils of the past and eastern tradition. He also sent a letter to his representative in Italy announcing that he intended to do the same in the west. The pope reacted by reasserting Rome’s supremacy. The two sides agreed to meet in Constantinople to discuss the matter. The meeting resulted in a letter by the western church’s representative, Humbert of Silva Candida, the future Pope Gregory VII, detailing all the Patriarch’s heresies. Rome’s representatives fled quickly after news of the letter accidentally spread beyond the confines of the meeting.

While the eastern part and the western part of the former unified Roman Empire would cooperate off and on, the churches of each half were never reunited. Nevertheless, they were all still Christians, something that was especially important after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. At this battle, the Muslim Seljuk Turks defeated Byzantine forces and captured the emperor Romanus IV, opening up Asia Minor to occupation by Muslims. Afterward, the Turks began settling in Asia Minor, ending Byzantine dominance in the region. The Byzantine Empire was restricted more or less to inside the walls of Constantinople, from which it would never again emerge.