PERIOD 3: Regional and Interregional Interactions, c. 600 C.E. to c. 1450

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Period Overview

Large empires, often rooted in revivals of core and foundational cultures that had developed in earlier history, emerged after 600 C.E. Though Rome had fallen under the power of non-Romans, most of the empire once ruled from there continued, with a new name, the Byzantine Empire. The capital moved to the city of Constantinople. In eastern Europe, the city of Kiev became the capital of an empire blending Slavic and Scandinavian influences and based on the prosperous trade between the Baltic Sea in the north and the Black Sea in the south. Following the teachings of Muhammad, followers of Islam carried their faith quickly throughout southern Asia and parts of Africa and Europe. They created centers of great intellectual achievement in Baghdad and Spain. In Africa, increased trade across the Sahara and along the east coast pulled Africa more deeply into global trade than ever before.

The revival of a united China resulted in great prosperity and innovation under the Tang and Song dynasties. While India was often divided, it had periods of unity and prosperity, and new trade-based empires emerged in Southeast Asia. In the 1200s, the Mongols, a group of Central Asia nomads, emerged and conquered lands from central Europe to the Pacific Ocean, creating the largest land empire in human history. While the conquest came with great devastation, the unity of so much territory under the rule of one group allowed trade to flourish once again across Eurasia, with new ideas and technology spreading easily.
Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus

“Justice is the constant and perpetual wish to render every one his due. The maxims of law are these: to live honestly, to hurt no one, and to give every man his due.”

— Corpus Iuris Civilis

By 330 C.E., the eastern half of the Roman Empire had become wealthier and more important than the western half. Thus, Emperor Constantine made the city of Byzantium the capital of the empire and renamed it Constantinople in his own honor. Today, this city is known as Istanbul. Later, in 395, the Roman Empire was divided administratively into completely separate empires, a western one ruled from Rome and an eastern one ruled from Constantinople. As explained in Chapter 4, the western empire declined until it was taken over by German invaders in 476. However, the eastern half, the Byzantine Empire grew and prospered.

The capital and cultural center of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople was located on the European side of the Bosphorus Strait. That narrow body of water connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, which in turn connects to the Mediterranean. The city’s location made a center of trade connecting Europe and Asia. This brought the city great wealth, and made it a blending of strong European and Asian influences.

The Byzantine Empire

As the map shows, by 527 C.E., the Byzantine Empire stretched over large swathes of the lands bordering the Mediterranean, including North Africa, Spain, Italy, Greece and the rest of the Balkans, and Southwest Asia. In addition to the capital of Constantinople and its surroundings, the empire also controlled the city of Rome.

As the wealthy capital of an expanding empire, Constantinople faced attacks from Germanic invaders. That is why strong, wide stone walls were built around Constantinople. Similar defenses were strengthened in other Byzantine cities. The Byzantines fought repeated battles on their eastern border with the powerful Sassanid Empire based in Persia. The two empires fought for control of land in Asia Minor and Syria.
**Byzantine Government** The Byzantine government was highly centralized. A vast imperial bureaucracy brought continuity to the empire even during periods of unrest and war. Although the empire enjoyed comparatively long periods of peace, it did experience instability, mostly caused by power struggles over succession to the throne.

**Justinian the Great** Along with his wife Empress Theodora, Emperor *Justinian I* (ruled 527–565) oversaw a revitalization of Constantinople. Most notably, a Christian church called *Hagia Sophia* was expanded, and its large dome became a focal point of the city's architecture. According to legend, when a Russian visitor in the tenth century saw the spectacular church, he commented, "There God dwells among men."

Another of Justinian’s significant contributions was the revival of the legal traditions of Rome. Justinian’s collection of laws was called the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Body of Civil Law), although it is often referred to simply as the Justinian code. The code remained a foundation of legal knowledge in Europe until the nineteenth century. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph comparing Justinian with another leader who codified the law, Hammurabi. See page 21.)

Under Justinian, the Byzantine Empire expanded its territory. In the east, Byzantine forces under General Belisarius defeated the Sassanids. This established the eastern border of the empire. In the west, the Byzantines conquered parts of North Africa, southern Spain, Sicily, and Italy. The expansion, however, was expensive. The Byzantine Empire was nearly bankrupt by the time Justinian died in 565.

**Byzantium after Justinian** After Justinian’s reign, the borders of the Byzantine Empire contracted. *Bulgars* (Turkic people originally from Central
Asia) took over much of the Balkans. Germanic tribes reoccupied much of Italy. Arab peoples took over Syria, Egypt, and the rest of North Africa, spreading the Islamic faith. The Islamic forces put Constantinople under siege twice, but the Byzantines were able to hold them off. In the 800s and later, the Byzantine Empire was able to expand again. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph connecting the Byzantine Empire with later events in the Balkans, see page 355.)

Heraclius Unlike previous Byzantine emperors, Heraclius (ruled 610 to 641) spoke Greek rather than Latin. During his reign, the attention of the empire was largely focused toward the east and resisting numerous invasions from Islamic forces in the Near East and Sassanid forces in Asia Minor. Although Heraclius never attained complete victory over the invaders, he did manage to greatly reduce the power and influence of the Sassanids in Southwest Asia.

Leo III Conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and Islamic forces continued into the next dynasty, known as the Syrian, which took power in 717. The first Syrian ruler, Leo III (ruled 717 to 740), defeated and reclaimed much of the Near Eastern territory lost by his predecessor, and gained additional lands in Asia Minor.

Three neighboring faiths developed various traditions about the portrayal of people in art. Fearful that people would worship art as a false idol, many Islamic artists portrayed no people at all (above, left). In contrast, Roman Catholic artists often portrayed Jesus (above, right). Orthodox artists showed the influence of both traditions, while some focused on non-religious figures, such as Queen Theodora (below).
Leo III’s greatest impact was on religion. He instituted a controversial policy of *iconoclasm*, the practice of opposing the veneration of religious images and icons. In this policy, he may have been influenced by Islam, which had a strong tradition against realistic renderings of religious figures such as Jesus and the prophet Muhammad. Leo III ordered all images and paintings in churches be either covered or destroyed. Opposition to his policy was strongest among monks in the Byzantine Empire, and it was not accepted by the popes.

**Basil II** Ruling from 976 to 1025, Basil II resumed the successful expansion of the Byzantine Empire started by Justinian four centuries earlier. In the Balkans, Byzantine forces defeated the Bulgars at the *Battle of Kleidion* in 1014. He also conquered some territory in eastern Asia Minor.

**Religion** The Byzantine Empire was a *theocracy*, meaning that there was no separation between the state and the church. The religious leaders were essentially a department of the government. The emperor appointed the head of the church (the *patriarch*) and sometimes even dictated what sermons should be delivered to local congregations. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph comparing the role of religion in Byzantium and in China. See page 182.)

Many *monasteries* and other religious communities were founded throughout the Byzantine Empire during the 300s and 400s. Monks and nuns lived in these centers of prayer and work. They provided aid to the people in times of natural disasters. The monasteries did not become centers of scholarship and education, however, as those in Western Europe did. As mentioned earlier, most monks and nuns opposed iconoclasm; they wanted to keep the icons in churches and monasteries.

The Byzantine Empire believed strongly in proselytizing, spreading their faith to others. They sent Christian missionaries abroad in hopes of converting nonbelievers such as the Bulgars and Moravians in Central Europe.

**The Missionary Cyril** The most famous and successful missionary was named Cyril. In about 863, Cyril created his own alphabet, which was loosely based on Greek, to help him spread not only the word of God but also literacy in general. This Cyrillic alphabet was adopted by Russians and people who spoke many of the Slavic languages—the family of languages used in Eastern Europe. The tradition of Christianity practiced in the Byzantine Empire, which later became known as the Eastern Orthodox tradition, continues to be practiced in much of Eastern Europe today, even though the empire dissolved centuries ago.

**Conflict with Rome** Over time, tensions increased between the Eastern wing of the church in the Byzantine Empire and the Western wing, centered in Rome. The controversy over Leo III’s iconoclastic policy was just one point of contention between the two branches. There was also disagreement over the authority of the Pope, and over whether Rome was the central city of Christendom. Tensions came to a head in 1054, when a *schism*, or separation, split the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe and the *Eastern Orthodox Church* in Southeastern Europe and Russia. (Test Prep: Write an outline comparing the schism of 1054 with the Reformation. See page 278.)
Trade and Prosperity The Byzantine Empire’s strong economy helped it endure for almost a thousand years. Because of Constantinople’s location, trade flourished with the Mediterranean region and Northern Europe, as well as with China and India via the Silk Roads. Byzantine trade was so great that people around the Mediterranean used Byzantine gold coins as a common currency.

In addition, silk weaving developed as an important industry in the empire as early as 550, again adding fuel to Byzantium’s economy. The government regulated this industry in order to prevent the formation of business monopolies.

The Byzantine economy also had a strong agricultural component. The labor was provided by peasants, most of whom were not free. They could not leave the land of their landowner because of either laws that prohibited it or debts that they could not pay to their landlord. From time to time, the Byzantine government tried to break this bond. The government’s theme system offered peasants their freedom if they agreed to join the imperial military service. Also, the emperors mandated limits as to how much land any one landlord could own.

Concentration of Wealth Imperial efforts to create an agricultural economy with many small landowners were not successful. Land became concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer people, which led to increasing peasant revolts. In addition, as landowners became more powerful, they were able to resist tax collections more easily than could small landowners. As a result, tax income declined, weakening the Byzantine government.

Free Peasant Revolts Free peasants were one step above peasants in the economic hierarchy. They were “free” in that they contracted with landowners and paid rent for the land they worked. They were one of the main sources of taxes and recruits for the government. Periodically, the nobility tried to force free peasants into peasant status to increase their income or land holdings. Predictably, such tactics sparked revolts, including one led by Basil the Copper Hand (928–932) and one led by Ivaylo (1277–1280).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trade Center</th>
<th>Imports</th>
<th>Exports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novgorod (Russia)</td>
<td>Spices, silk, steel, horses, jewels</td>
<td>Furs, honey, wax, wool, linens, slaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timbuktu (Africa)</td>
<td>Textiles, horses</td>
<td>Salt, gold, slaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swahili city-states (Africa)</td>
<td>Porcelain, jewelry, glass, textiles</td>
<td>Ivory, exotic animals, gold, slaves, cotton, glass beads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hangzhou (China)</td>
<td>Cotton, wool, ivory, gold, silver</td>
<td>Silk, rice, spices, porcelain, tea, paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calicut (India)</td>
<td>Horses, glassware, porcelain, satin</td>
<td>Spices, jewels, gold, cotton, silk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad (Arabia)</td>
<td>Textiles, slaves, porcelain</td>
<td>Textiles, leather, paper, books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melaka (Indonesia)</td>
<td>Porcelain, paper, textiles, sugar, salt</td>
<td>Rice, pepper, spices, tin, aromatic woods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venice (Italy)</td>
<td>Spices, silk, jewels</td>
<td>Metals, salt, wheat, wines, oils</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Arts**  Arts, literature, and education flourished during the Byzantine Empire. They were nearly all religious in nature. Literature of the period focused on the importance of seeking salvation by obeying God’s will. Books and songs were written detailing the lives of Jesus and Mary, as well as a large number of Christian saints. Fine artists were likewise focused on devotional work, such as icons and mosaics depicting Christian themes and *illuminated manuscripts* of the Bible, which were elaborately decorated with colored illustrations and flecked with silver and gold. Byzantine art proved highly influential on later generations, both in Europe and in Islamic cultures.

**Education**  Education during the Byzantine Empire was likewise dominated by religion. Schools run by the Eastern Orthodox Church taught a wide variety of subjects, including philosophy, math, medicine, and law—all with a religious point of view. The *University of Constantinople* was founded in 850; many of its students were trained for service in the vast Byzantine bureaucracy, while others focused on copying the classical writings from Ancient Greece and Rome.

**Life in the City**  The city of Constantinople, wealthy from its position as a trade center, became known for the lavish homes of its aristocrats, its beautiful churches, and the impressive imperial palace. Like Rome, even the common people went to public baths. Other gathering spots were restaurants, taverns, and the *Hippodrome*, a large stadium like the Coliseum in the Rome. The other large cities of the Byzantine Empire, such as Antioch, Thessalonica, and Trebizond, had similar attractions, but none had an imperial palace and none rivaled Constantinople in grandeur.
Decline and Fall  The expenses of constant conflict on both its eastern and western borders, combined with the reluctance of the wealthy to pay taxes and the unrest among the common people, slowly undermined the strength of the Byzantine Empire. The declining strength can be seen in a series of military defeats spread out over four centuries. In 1071, a group that originated in the steppes of central Asia known as the Seljuk Turks defeated Byzantine forces in the Battle of Manzikert. After this defeat, the Turks gradually took more and more territory in Asia Minor.

Around that same time, Byzantine forces clashed with a new power in the Mediterranean—the Normans from northern France. The Normans took control of Sicily and southern Italy from the Byzantines in 1071. (For more about the Normans and their invasion of England in 1066, see Chapter 12.)

Another major setback for the Byzantines came in the early 1200s. As you will read later, in 1095, the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I asked the pope to call upon Roman Catholics in Western Europe to help fight against the Turks in the region of the Middle East called the Levant, an area many Christians called the “Holy Land.” The result was a series of military expeditions, called the Crusades, in which knights and commoners from Western Europe traveled to the Levant with hopes of seizing control for Christianity. During the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204), soldiers from Western Europe gathered in the Italian city of Venice to prepare to sail to the Levant. However, the Venetians persuaded, or possibly coerced, crusading European knights to sack their trading rivals in Constantinople first.

The Byzantine Empire continued to shrink. By the fifteenth century, the remnant of the empire was concentrated solely in Europe. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks, who had replaced the Seljuk Turks in western Asia Minor, conquered Constantinople, marking the end of the Byzantine Empire.

Slavic Peoples and the Origins of Russia

Historians know little about the earliest history of the Slavs. They originally populated the steppes to the northeast of the Black Sea. By about 500 B.C.E., three identifiable Slavic-language groups began to emerge:

- East Slavic, which evolved into Ukrainian and Russian
- West Slavic, which evolved into Polish, Slovak, and Czech
- South Slavic, which evolved into Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian

At first, the Slavs lived a hunter-forager lifestyle, which was dictated by their environment. In the forested north, the soil in the area was fertile, but the growing season was short. By contrast, the steppes to the south enjoyed a longer growing season but the land was too tough to plow with existing technology.

The Rise of Kievan Rus  The East Slavs made contact with people of Northern Europe known as Vikings around 800. As you will read in Chapter 12, the Vikings expanded from their homeland in Scandinavia west into England, south into Western Europe, and east into Slavic territory. They moved south and east along river routes, including Europe’s fourth longest river, the extensive
Dnieper River, flowing from Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine to the Black Sea. By 900, the Vikings ruled the region and the East Slavs. Viking rulers were called Rus, a word that later became the source of the name Russia. In the early 900s, under the Viking ruler Oleg, a settlement on the Dnieper River became the Principality of Kiev (see the map), also called Kievan Rus.

Kievan Rus was a collection of city-states. They could govern themselves as long as they paid tribute to the grand prince of Kiev. The grand prince was elected by a council of boyars, or nobles. The boyars, who had to be Viking military leaders, also served as a war council. Since the boyars represented the people they governed, they are sometimes viewed as early democratic body.

**KIEVAN RUS, 750 TO 1130**

![Map of Kievan Rus, 750 to 1130](image)

**Kiev Converts to Christianity** The Byzantine Empire sent missionaries to convert the people of Kievan Rus to Orthodox Christianity. The Byzantines were motivated by a desire to spread the religion and by worries that a pagan Kievan Rus could present a potential political threat to the empire.

Conversion succeeded in 989, when the Kievan Rus ruler, Prince Vladimir I ("the Great"), married the sister of the Byzantine emperor. Vladimir agreed to convert to Orthodox Christianity and to force his subjects to as well. With its new religion, Kievan Rus became increasingly linked to the empire culturally and politically. Byzantine advisers, priests, and teachers were sent to Kiev. Hundreds of wooden onion-dome churches were built in the style of Byzantine churches, and the monastic tradition came to Kievan Rus. People in Kievan Rus accepted the idea of imperial control of the church. Though the ruling elite in Kievan Rus converted, peasants maintained pagan traditions for centuries.
The Golden Age of Kievan Rus During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Kievan Rus enjoyed a strong government and a cohesive society. The first great ruler of this golden age was Vladimir I, who oversaw the conversion of Kievan Rus to Christianity. He also expanded the western border of his kingdom. The second great leader was Vladimir’s son, Yaroslav I (ruled 1019–1054). He is known as Yaroslav the Wise because he promoted education and codified the legal system, Russkaya Pravda (“Russian Justice”).

The Slave Trade The rulers of Kievan Rus traded with Baghdad to the southeast, the Baltic ports to the northwest, and, mostly, with the Byzantine Empire. Kievan Rus sold some honey, hides, furs, and timber. However, it had more people than it could support easily, so it had little surplus of anything, except people. Each fall, the Kievan princes demanded that all towns and agricultural areas pay tribute by sending a certain number of peasants to Kiev. The princes then organized an expedition to Constantinople by boat, where they would sell the peasants as slaves. In return, the Kievan princes received gold coins and other riches of the Byzantine Empire. When the princes were not satisfied with these exchanges (as in 860, 907, and 1043), they sent naval expeditions to raid Constantinople.

The Decline of Kiev The increasing dependence of Kievan Rus on the Byzantine Empire proved its undoing. Kievan trade delegations found reaching Constantinople difficult because of the invasion of nomadic groups from central Asia, such as the Pechenegs of the steppes south of Kiev. As Byzantium’s economic fortunes declined, so did Kiev’s. In 1169 and 1204, northern Russian princes took advantage of Kiev’s weakness by sacking the city.

Less than forty years later, in 1240, Kiev was invaded by the largest and most powerful group from Central Asia, the Mongols, who took over and stayed for almost 250 years. During this period, the so-called Khanate of the Golden Horde occupied the steppes and exacted tribute from those Russian princes living in the forests to the north. The Mongols were not interested in occupying the forests, preferring the grassy steppes for their grazing herds of horses. By the time the Mongols were finally defeated by Russian forces, the Byzantine Empire had fallen. (The Mongols are discussed in more detail on page 241.)

Novgorod According to legend, a Scandinavian, Rurik, founded the northern Kievan Rus city of Novgorod in the tenth century. Over the next four centuries, Germans, Finns, Swedes, and Slavs migrated there, creating a large, multicultural city of 400,000 people. Novgorod prospered through trade, connecting the Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions along the Volga and Dnieper Rivers. Trade products included furs, honey, and tar from the north; cloth and metals from farther west in Europe; and grains from farther east in Russia. Novgorod was one of many trading cities that grew between 800 and 1300. During this period, a warming climate boosted agricultural productivity, which resulted in more surplus goods for trade. Novgorod became independent from Kievan Rus in the twelfth century. However, like many cities in this era, it was eventually absorbed by a growing empire. In the fifteenth century, a newly organized Russian empire would seize control of Novgorod.