INTRODUCTION

In 1453, Constantinople was besieged and taken by Mehmet the Great, Sultan of the Ottoman Turks. Scholars have said that when Constantinople fell to the Turks that this was the end of the Byzantine Empire. These scholars were wrong because no empire of that name ever existed.

The empire that ended when the Turks took Constantinople in 1453 was the Roman Empire. This was the Roman Empire of Augustus, Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. This was the Roman Empire that, at its peak, ruled from the Rhine River in the north to the Atlas Mountains in the south; from the coast of Britain in the west to the Euphrates River in the east.

After Constantinople fell, western scholars such as Hieronymus Wolf (1516–1580) in his Corpus Historiae Byzantinae began referring to the empire that fell when the Turks took Constantinople as the “Byzantine Empire”. Modern scholars, such as John Julius Norwich, the author of the very readable three volume history, “Byzantium”, routinely refer to the “Byzantine Empire” as if that name had legitimate historical antecedents. However, there is no historical underpinning for referring to the Roman Empire as the Byzantine Empire.

Constantinople was founded by the Emperor Constantine in 330.¹ During its imperium, the inhabitants of the empire of which Constantinople was the capital referred to themselves as

“Romans” and to their empire as the “Roman Empire”. ² Even their enemies, the Turks, referred to them as “Rūmi” (Romans”) and their empire as “Rūm” (Rome).³

The term, “the Byzantine Empire”, is a misnomer. There is no reason to continue to refer to the “Byzantine Empire” beyond the fact that this mistake has been made and endorsed for so long by historians. Conversely, there is much to be gained by acknowledging that it was the Roman Empire that fell in 1453. Most importantly, it is historically accurate. What we have called the “Byzantine Empire” was the direct continuation of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, historical accuracy as to the name, in itself, acknowledges the monumental achievements of the Roman Empire and its people that persevered politically and militarily against so many enemies while preserving so much of Antiquity.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Some might argue that Byzantine Empire is a more accurate term based on the theory that the city of Byzantium was the original Greek city located on the site of the later Constantinople. However, the city of Byzantium had been part of the Roman Empire for centuries before it was vastly enlarged to become Constantinople.

Others might argue that an empire that does not include the city of Rome should not be called the Roman Empire. However, Rome had ceased to be the capital of the Roman Empire

long before Constantinople was constructed. The capital of the Empire had come to be wherever the reigning emperor(s) were headquartered with their legions.

Another possible distinguishing feature is that the Greek language officially replaced Latin as the language of government during the reign of the Emperor Heraclius (575-641). In its most simplistic form, this argument is that an empire that speaks Greek should not be called the Roman Empire. This argument ignores the fact that the transition was not imposed externally. Greek was the dominant language throughout the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire throughout its history. The only change was that the government and military stopped using Latin and came to use Greek. The transition to the use of the Greek language is an interesting cultural phenomena but it is not sufficient to transform the Roman Empire into an entity so different that it requires a different name.

One of the most insidious arguments for the continued use of the terms, “Byzantine Empire” and “Byzantine(s)” is that it has been used for so long that it has become an accepted convention. After all, there are many books, scholarly journals and articles that have used and continue to use these terms. Why change? The answer to this question is that historical accuracy is more important than the entrenched use of a misleading misnomer. By using the historically accurate terms, the true meaning of the Roman achievement can be seen by students and measured by scholars. The use of the terms, “Byzantine Empire” and “Byzantine(s)” does not explain, instead, it obscures. There was no Byzantine Empire that came after the Roman Empire. Instead, there was a continuation of the Roman Empire that endured until 1453.

Scholars have also argued that the Eastern Roman Empire was so much less than the classical Roman Empire that it merited the name, “Byzantine”, used as a pejorative. Edward Gibbon expressed this argument in his landmark work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as follows:

> From the time of Heraclius, the Byzantine theatre is contracted and darkened: the line of empire, which had been defined by the laws of Justinian and the arms of Belisaurius, recedes on all sides from our view . . . . But the subjects of the Byzantine Empire, who assume and dishonor the names both of Greeks and Romans, present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity, nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes.\(^5\)

Gibbon’s theory regarding the lesser nature of his “Byzantine Empire” is based on various value judgments he makes regarding the nobility of character and the achievements of the emperors after the reign of Heraclius (575-641). However, even if all the emperors were cowardly failures, this is no reason to change the name of their empire from the Roman Empire to the Byzantine Empire. Moreover, as can be seen in even this short overview of its history, the history of the Roman Empire after the loss of its western provinces is the story of incredible resilience.

**IN THE BEGINNING**

The Roman Empire had been divided, in practice, into western and eastern political entities each administered by an emperor since the reign of the Emperor Diocletian (284-301).

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Diocletian had established a Tetrarchy (rule of four) in which two emperors, each with the title “Augustus”, and two junior emperors, each with the title “Caesar”, ruled the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire.\(^6\)

Eventually, this system broke down and a civil war ensued between contending emperors, one of whom was Constantine. By 312, Constantine had defeated his rivals in a long and bloody civil war which ended in the famous battle of the Milvian Bridge.\(^7\) Constantine’s victory left him as the sole emperor of an undivided Roman Empire.

Constantinople was constructed from 324-330 to be the new capital of the Roman Empire. It was even officially named “Nova Roma”, although that name never came into popular usage. Instead, it came to be known as Constantinople, the City of Constantine.\(^8\)

The historian John Julius Norwich has argued that the founding of Constantinople was also the beginning of the Byzantine Empire.\(^9\) This is a logical date if there ever was an entity called the Byzantine Empire but, since there was not any such entity, it makes no sense to assert that the “Byzantine Empire” began at a time when the Roman Empire was successfully reunited under one of its greatest emperors.

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AT THE END OF THE WEST, THE EAST STILL STANDS

After 395, the empire was divided once again into two separate administrative and military entities. The capital of the Eastern Roman Empire was Constantinople. The capital of the Western Roman Empire was Milan until 402 when it was moved to Ravenna. Rome itself had become a declining backwater.

The Western Roman Empire went through a seemingly endless succession of weak and ineffective emperors. The real power was wielded by generals such as Stilicho and Aetius. In 476, Odoacer, a barbarian general, deposed Romanus Augustulus, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire. Odoacer did not have himself proclaimed emperor. Instead, he returned the Imperial regalia to Zeno, the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire in Constantinople.10

The Western Roman Empire had fallen but the Roman Empire still existed with its capital in Constantinople. The Eastern Roman Empire continued because it had been the stronger entity for a considerable time. It was more populous, urbanized and economically viable and had suffered less from the barbarians than had the West. When the Western Roman Empire fell, the Roman Empire was no longer split into two entities. There remained only the “Roman Empire”. Accordingly, the term, “Roman Empire” shall be used hereinafter rather than “Eastern Roman Empire” or Byzantine Empire”.

JUSTINIAN’S RECONQUEST

In 527, the Emperor Justinian came to the throne. Justinian was a brilliant administrator and jurist who inherited a full treasury and a well-organized state. Given its strength, it was not unrealistic for Justinian to believe that the western provinces of the Roman Empire could be recovered.

During Justinian’s reign wars were fought to stabilize the Empire’s eastern frontiers with the Persians and to recover the western provinces of the Roman Empire. The history of these wars was written by Procopius who begins his seven volume work, History of the Wars, as follows:

Procopius of Caesarea has written the history of the wars which Justinian, Emperor of the Romans, waged against the barbarians of the East and of the West, relating separately the events of each one, to the end that the long course of time may not overwhelm deeds of singular importance through lack of a record, and thus abandon them to oblivion and utterly obliterate them.¹¹

Justinian sent his famous general Belisarius to the eastern frontier with the Persians. Belisarius won a battle near Daras which solidified the Roman frontier.¹² Procopius described the aftermath of this battle as follows:


For on that day the Persians had been defeated in battle by the Romans, a thing which had not happened for a long time. Thus the two armies separated from each other. And the Persians were no longer willing to fight a pitched battle with the Romans. However, some sudden attacks were made on both sides, in which the Romans were not at a disadvantage. Such, then, was the fortune of the armies in Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{13}

Eventually, Justinian entered into a long truce with the Persians. Although this truce required large annual payments to the Persians, Justinian was free to turn his attention to the West.

The reconquest of the Western Roman Empire from its barbarian conquerors was no easy task. The Vandals had held North Africa for over a hundred years. The Visigoths held Spain and the Ostrogoths had developed a strong state in Italy.

Justinian began his campaign in 533 by sending Belisarius to recover North Africa. In a whirlwind campaign, Belisarius defeated the Vandals, took Carthage, the Vandals’ capital, and re-established Roman rule in North Africa in under a year.\textsuperscript{14} Over time, Justinian rebuilt Carthage and rejuvenated the economy of Roman North Africa.

Having destroyed the Vandal Kingdom, Justinian turned his attention to the Ostrogothic Kingdom in Italy. Once more, he called on Belisarius. By 535, Belisarius had taken Sicily. In


540, Belisarius took Ravenna, the capital of the Ostrogothic state.\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately for the Romans, Justinian underestimated the tenacity of the Ostrogoths. Underfunded and undermanned, the Romans were unable to subdue the Ostrogoths until 555.\textsuperscript{16}

In 551, Justinian took advantage of a rebellion in Visigothic Spain to seize the southeast corner of Spain.\textsuperscript{17} The Romans did not hold this area for long but, for the moment, the Mediterranean was \textit{Mare Nostrum} once again.

Justinian successfully restored large portions of the former Western Roman Empire to Roman control. Unfortunately, he had exhausted the treasury and left the Empire over extended.\textsuperscript{18} Justinian died in 565. Within three years, the Lombards, another Germanic tribe, took most of Italy and the Visigoths began to recover their position in Spain. Luckily, Justinian’s rebuilding of the Roman state in North Africa was successful. When the next crisis occurred, the Romans of North Africa were able to come to the aid of Constantinople.

**RESCUED BY HERACLUS**

By 610, the Roman Empire was in a perilous situation. Constantinople was menaced from the north by the Avars and the east by the Persians. Internally, the Romans were suffering under the rule of the Emperor Phocas who was an incompetent, sadistic tyrant interested more in


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, at p. 361-362.


torturing his imagined internal enemies than in defending the Empire. In a curious historical twist, the Empire would be delivered from Phocas by an expeditionary force sent from North Africa.

Heraclius the Elder, the Exarch of Africa, sent his son Heraclius with a fleet to depose Phocas. In one of the Roman Empire’s most dramatic moments, the rescue fleet sailed into a harbor at Constantinople. The handsome young Heraclius, wearing white armor, was leading his fleet. An icon of the Virgin Mary was affixed to the prow of Heraclius’ ship. There was no resistance. Phocas’ guards even delivered him to Heraclius for execution. The next day, Heraclius was crowned Emperor and married Fabia, his betrothed.

During the reign of Phocas, the Persians under Khosrau II had invaded the Roman Empire and had taken western Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia, Cappadocia, Paphlagonia and Galatia. In 611, the Persians conquered the great city of Antioch and pushed into Anatolia, the Roman heartland.

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Interestingly, the Qur’an predicted the eventually Roman victory in their war with the Persians. In Sura 30, it is stated:

The Romans have been conquered in the neighboring land. But having been conquered they will conquer in a few years (less than ten). God’s is the imperative first and last. On that day the believers will rejoice in the help of God.²⁴

By 621, the Persians had taken Palestine and Egypt and had even captured Chalcedon across the Bosphorus from Constantinople. Making matters worse for the Romans, the Avars and their Slavic allies had overrun the Roman territories in the Balkans. Constantinople was surrounded.

In 622, Heraclius rebuilt his army’s morale on the basis that the conflict with the Persians was a religious war for the survival of Christianity. Heraclius then campaigned in Armenia where he defeated a Persian army under Shahrbaraz.²⁵ In 624, Heraclius campaigned successfully in Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The Avars led a coalition of 80,000 warriors to besiege Constantinople In 626. The Avars were a militarily advanced culture that constructed and used sophisticated siege engines. In addition, the Persians under Shahrbaraz held the Asian side of the Bosphorus. If the Avars and the Persians could unite, it would be difficult for Constantinople to hold out.


Constantinople was defended by 12,000 troops and the redoubtable Theodosian Land Walls. Moreover, the Patriarch Sergius had mobilized the population to defend the walls. Most importantly, the Romans had an experienced navy.

The Avars’ siege engines could not breach the Land Walls. The Roman navy defeated the Persian fleet and the Avar coalition in two naval engagements. These victories prevented the Avars and Persians from combining their forces. Eventually, the Avars could not maintain the siege due to lack of supplies. Constantinople was saved. 26

In 626, Heraclius won a great victory over the Persian army at Nineveh. Heraclius then sacked the great palace of Khosrau II at Dastagird. These victories led to the overthrow of Khosrau II by his son, Kavadh II, who then sued for peace. In 629, Heraclius restored what the Romans believed was the True Cross to Jerusalem.

Towards the end of the reign of Heraclius, the Muslim Arabs, who were just beginning the great Islamic conquests, invaded Roman territory in Palestine and Syria. The Romans suffered a series of defeats culminating in the battle of Yarmouk. The Romans lost all their territory south of the Tarsus Mountains in southern Anatolia, including Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, Egypt and North Africa.

THE TIDE OF ISLAM

By 651, the Arabs had conquered the Sassanian Persian Empire. The Arab armies had also conquered a good portion of the Roman Empire. The goal of the Arab strategists was the conquest of Constantinople and they knew that their success was dependent on controlling the

sea. To that end, the Arabs had built a powerful navy. This Arab navy had defeated the much more experienced Roman navy at the Battle of the Masts in 655.\footnote{Hugh Kennedy, \textit{The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In} (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007) pp. 327-329.}

In 674, the Arabs began to besiege Constantinople which was defended by Constantine IV, the great-grandson of Heraclius. The Arabs brought a considerable fleet which attacked Constantinople’s sea walls with various siege engines. The siege lasted four years. Eventually, the Romans defeated the Arab fleet by using Greek fire, a liquid petroleum incendiary shot from a siphon system. The Arabs abandoned the siege in 678. After their defeat, the Arabs entered into a treaty with the Romans under which they paid an annual tribute of 3,000 pounds of gold to the Emperor.\footnote{John Julius Norwich, \textit{Byzantium: The Early Centuries} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989) p. 324.}

In 717-718, the Arabs under the leadership of the Umayyad Caliphate besieged Constantinople again. The Arabs brought a large fleet and numerous army. Once again, the Romans were able to defeat the Arab fleet. A severe winter punished the Arabs with starvation and disease. Finally, the Arabs were forced to end the siege.\footnote{Hugh Kennedy, \textit{The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In} (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007) pp. 331-332.} The tide of Islam receded for the moment.

It has been accepted wisdom in the West that Europe was saved from Islamic conquest by the victory of Charles Martell’s Franks over the invading Arabs at Poitiers in 732. The reality is
that Europe was saved by the Roman Empire when it held Constantinople against the Arabs when the tide of Islamic expansion was at its height.

THE TIDE TURNS – ROMAN EXPANSION

In 867, Basil I became the first emperor of the Macedonian dynasty that ruled the Roman Empire until 1025. This was a time of military resurgence and cultural revival.

The Romans went on the offensive against the Muslims. During this time, the Romans were led by the famous soldier emperors: Nikephoros II Phokas, John I Tzimiskes and Basil II. Many battles were fought. Although some battles were lost, the tide had turned and the Romans were able to recover and hold considerable territory.

During the Macedonian dynasty, the Romans also beat back the incursions of the Bulgarian Empire. Once again, many battles were fought. Constantinople was even besieged by the Bulgarians. Basil II fought to destroy Bulgaria for twenty years. Little by little, Bulgaria was conquered. By 1018, the Bulgarian Empire was destroyed and its territory was incorporated into the Roman Empire.30

DISASTER AT MANZIKERT

After the expansion and recovery bought with the prowess of the soldier emperors, weak and corrupt leadership led to a decline. The treasury became empty and the army was neglected. Making matters worse, the Seljuq Turks began pressing into Anatolia in 1065-1067.

In 1068, Romanos Diogenes became Emperor. He gathered a large army and pushed east hoping to defeat the Seljuqs. However, in 1071, at the Battle of Manzikert, Romanos was defeated by the Sultan Alp Arslan. Rather than uniting against the Seljuq threat, the Romans fought among themselves. By 1081, the Seljuqs had expanded their rule over most of the Anatolian plateau.  

THE COMNENIAN RESTORATION AND THE CRUSADES

The fortunes of the Roman Empire were at a nadir after Manzikert. This miserable situation was described by the historian Anna Comnena, the daughter of the Emperor Alexius I, who in her famous history, *The Alexiad*, wrote:

> The barbarians had gone unchecked, from the time when they invaded the Empire soon after Diogenes’ elevation to the throne and his eastern campaign (which was ill-starred from the very beginning) right down to my father’s reign. . . . Cities were wiped out; lands ravaged, all the territories of Rome stained with Christian blood.  

Fighting on all fronts, Alexius stabilized the Empire. He battled the Normans under Robert Guiscard and his son Bohemond in the western Balkans. Alexius was defeated by the Normans at the Battle of Dyrrhachium in 1081. Although Robert Guiscard was momentarily triumphant, Alexius’ successful diplomacy forced Guiscard to return to Italy to defend his


holdings. After more campaigning, Alexius was able to defeat Bohemond and drive the Normans out of the Empire.  

Alexius also defeated the Pechenegs, a steppe tribe that had invaded the Empire in the northern Balkans with 80,000 men. Alexius was successful militarily but the Empire was too weak to fight the Seljuq Turks in Anatolia. Alexius’ envoys sought help with the recruiting of mercenaries from Pope Urban II. In response, Pope Urban called on the knights of the West to save the Holy Land and launched the First Crusade.

Moving the Western armies of the First Crusade through Roman territory took diplomacy. Alexius obtained oaths from most of the crusading lords that they would give any cities and territory they took to the Emperor. The Romans shipped the Crusaders across the Bosphorus into Asia Minor. The Romans and the Crusaders forced the surrender of Nicaea to the Emperor. Soon after, the Western knights defeated the Seljuqs at Dorylaeum. Eventually the First Crusade took Antioch and later Jerusalem. However, in a breach of their agreement with Alexius, the Crusaders established their own small states.

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Alexius problems with the Crusaders did not end with the culmination of the First Crusade. Bohemond Guiscard had become Lord of Antioch. Eventually, Bohemond attacked the Roman Empire again in the western Balkans. He was defeated by Alexius and made to swear an oath of loyalty to the Emperor.\textsuperscript{39} Anna Comnena records this agreement as including the following language.

\begin{quote}
I, Bohemond the son of Robert Guiscard, make this agreement with Your Highnesses, and I intend to keep this agreement inviolate with Your Majesties; that is to say, with you, the Autocrat of the Romans, the Lord Alexius, \ldots and I will be your liege-man, sincere and true, as long as I breathe and am numbered among the living. And I will arm my hand against any enemies that may hereafter rise up against the Romans and you, the ever-august Rulers of the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

The Comnenian restoration lasted from 1081 to 1185. During that time, the Roman Empire was ruled by able Emperors who recovered lost territory and brought about an economic recovery.

\textbf{THE FOURTH CRUSADE}


After ascending to the papacy in 1198, Pope Innocent III preached the Fourth Crusade. However, the Venetians under their Doge Enrico Dandolo subverted the Crusaders into attacking Constantinople. The Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir described the events leading to the sack of Constantinople as follows:

The king of the Rūm fled without a fight, Ibn al Athir writes, and the Franj placed their young candidate on the throne. But he held power in name only, for the Franj made all the decisions. They imposed very heavy tribute on the people, and when payment proved impossible, they seized all the gold and jewels, even that which was part of the crosses and images of the Messiah, peace be upon him. The Rūm then revolted, killed the young monarch, expelled the Franj from the city, and barricaded the city gates.”

On April 12, 1204, the Crusaders fought their way into Constantinople. By the next day, Constantinople was given over to pillage and rapine that lasted three days. A Muslim has left us this tragic description of the sack of Constantinople:

All the Rūm were killed or despoiled, the Mosul historian relates. Some of their notables, pursued by the Franj, attempted to seek refuge in the great church they

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call Sophia. A group of priests and monks came out bearing crosses and Bibles, begging their attackers to spare their lives, but he Franj paid no heed to their entreaties. They massacred them all and plundered the church.\footnote{Amin Maalouf, \textit{The Crusades Through Arab Eyes}, translated by Jon Rothschild (New York, Schocken Books, 1984) p. 221-222.}

The victorious Crusaders and the Venetians divided up the Roman Empire. The Crusaders formed what has been called the Latin Empire which lasted 57 years.

\textbf{THE RECONQUEST}

Even after the fall of Constantinople, the Romans did not give up. Theodore I Lascaris began the Nicaean Empire which controlled a portion of western Anatolia. Gradually consolidating a functioning state, the Romans slowly fought back against the Latin emperors. Theodore and his successors built the Nicaean Empire on a strong foundation and greatly expanded its territory.\footnote{Ibid. at pp. 202-204.}

In 1259, Michael VII Palaeologus became Emperor of the Nicaean Empire. He took Constantinople from the Latin Empire in 1261.\footnote{Jonathan Phillips, \textit{The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople} (New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2005) pp. 308-309.} The Palaeologan Dynasty would rule the Roman Empire for another 193 years. The Roman Empire had, once again, shown that it was resilient and resourceful.

\textbf{THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE}
The last years of the Roman Empire were spent in a fruitless search for aid from the West. The last Emperor, Constantine Palaeologus, had spent his entire adult life fighting the Turks. He knew that the situation was hopeless without aid from the West. He did everything he could but the help that came from the West was very limited. A Genoese captain named Giovanni Giustiniani Longo came with 700 soldiers that he financed and heroically attempted to defend Constantinople.47

The Turks had 60,000 soldiers and very advanced artillery.48 Constantinople was defended by less than 8,000 men.49 The defenders held out for 53 days. Gradually, the Turkish artillery smashed the great Land Walls that had never been breached. The constant attacks by the Turkish soldiery wore down the morale of the defenders. On the last night, the Emperor Constantine and the people of Constantinople attended a liturgical service in the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia for the last time.50 There was no realistic hope of even holding out another day but they consecrated themselves to their task. The next day, the Emperor Constantine died fighting defending his Empire.

It should be noted that, after conquering Constantinople, Mehmet the Great added to his many titles that of the Kayser-i Rûm which meant “Caesar of Rome”.

CONCLUSION


48 Ibid., at pp. 86-94, 102,

49 Ibid., at p. 103.

In the final analysis, the Western historians who invented the name, “Byzantine Empire”, as a way of differentiating classical Rome from the empire of the later, and they felt lesser, Greek-speaking Romans, were simply wrong. There never was a Byzantine Empire. It is a historical fallacy. The empire that finally fell that terrifying Tuesday in 1453 was the Roman Empire. We should call it what it was and give it the credit that it has deserved for so long.