

Constantine and the Rise of the Eastern Empire

In addition to persecuting the Christians, Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into two parts, a Greek-speaking east and a Latin-speaking west. The eastern portion included Greece and the Middle East, and the western portion, Italy, France, Spain, Britain, and North Africa. Diocletian ruled the eastern portion and a co-emperor ruled the west.

Constantine became emperor of the west in 306 CE. He converted to Christianity in 312 CE on the battlefield, thus becoming the first Christian emperor. In 313 CE, he and the emperor in the east agreed to allow Christians to practice their religion openly. The document that granted religious toleration to Christians is known as the Edict of Milan. From this point on, Christianity moved rapidly from being a minority religion, subject to persecution, to being the official religion, and the religion of a growing number of Roman citizens.

Ultimately, Constantine defeated the emperor in the east and ruled both portions of the empire. In 324 CE, he built a new eastern capital, Constantinople, on the site of the former Greek city of Byzantium. Over time, this city astride the Bosphorus became the center of a vast trading network that connected Europe with the Middle East and the rest of Asia and brought the empire great riches. Today, this city is known as Istanbul.

The Eastern Empire

For 1,000 years after the fall of the empire in the west, the Byzantine Empire in the east continued to build on the base of ancient Greek and Roman traditions and culture. The Byzantine Empire was a significant force in European politics until 1453, when the city of Constantinople was captured by the Ottoman Turks.

Because of its location on international trade routes, Constantinople also received new cultural influences from the Middle East and other parts of Asia, which, in turn, blended with Greco-Roman traditions to create its own cultural heritage. For example, early Byzantine architects used the Roman dome in their buildings, but Byzantine artists later created a new art form featuring more arches and domes made of brick. The artists also found less naturalistic and more formal ways to represent religious figures from Christianity in their art.

Teaching Idea

If students were in Core Knowledge schools in Grade 1, they should have learned in the World History and Geography section about the Code of Hammurabi and the importance of having written laws. In Grade 2, they extended this concept in studying King Asoka of the Maurya dynasty in India, who had the laws of his empire inscribed on tall pillars. In Grade 3, they learn about Justinian's Code. 43

Justinian

Justinian, who ruled from 527 CE to 565 CE, was the last emperor to attempt to rule both eastern and western portions of the former Roman Empire. His armies succeeded in routing Germanic invaders and retaking southern Spain, Italy, and North Africa. With his wife, Theodora, as co-ruler, Justinian governed the largest area that the Byzantine Empire would possess. Later emperors were unable to hold onto these gains.

One of the major accomplishments of Justinian was the codification of Roman law, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, literally “the body of civil law.” All Roman laws, as well as the decrees of emperors and the writings of judges, were collected. The work outlived Justinian and was updated periodically by later emperors. By the 1100s CE, the Justinian Code, as it became known, was in use in the Roman Catholic Church and in western European nations.