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BYZANTINE CIVILISATION

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# H I S T O R Y

JANUARY, 1926

## BYZANTINE CIVILISATION <sup>1</sup>

It is probable that in the mind of the average Englishman the very word "Byzantine" still awakes a subtle suggestion of weariness, of undefined repulsion. The spell of genius is potent, without difficulty it gives birth to a tradition, and a tradition has more lives than a cat. We remember that to Voltaire Byzantine history was a worthless repertory of declamation and miracles, disgraceful to the human intellect: we cannot forget that to Gibbon Byzantine annals were a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery. Very recently the Byzantine State has been described as "a vicious and decaying parody of the Roman Empire eking out its contemptible life on the Bosphoros." But surely the facts should give us pause: Constantinople was founded early in the fourth century; it fell in 1204 when assailed by that criminal filibustering expedition, the Fourth Crusade; it fell finally before the Osmanli Turks in 1453. For over 1100 years after Constantine's death it was constantly attacked by countless foes—and yet the Empire, whose heart it was, survived. The wonder of East Rome is not to be found in its death, but in its life: in its amazing powers of resurrection and re-birth lies the attraction of its history.

The danger of all great systematic formulations of constitutional theory and practice is that they tend to obscure the fact of historic development: this is true even of such a masterpiece as Mommsen's *Staatsrecht*. Yet it is obviously essential for the student of history to be alive to this development—to mark and distinguish the separate stages in what may appear to the beholder as a continuous and unbroken evolution. It is easy to think and talk of the Roman Empire as an undifferentiated whole: but the Roman Empire of the first and second centuries is one

<sup>1</sup> An abbreviation of a paper read at a meeting of the London Branch of the Association in February 1925. See further the writer's little book, *The Byzantine Empire* (Home University Library), to be published by Williams and Norgate in 1926.

thing, the Roman Empire of the third century is another and a very dissimilar thing. The third century is the century of crisis : if we would understand the differences between the early Empire and the Empire of the fourth century we must at least raise the question : What was the nature of that third-century crisis ? And to realise the significance of that question, we must recur in retrospect to the origins of the Principate : we must remind ourselves that the great gift of Augustus—the *Pax Augusta*—had a wider meaning than is sometimes recognised : not only was the period of bloodshed and proscription to be brought to an end—that period of which Tacitus wrote, *continua per viginti annos discordia : non mos, non ius* (*Annals*, iii. 28)—but the swollen armies of the age of revolution were to be disbanded and the Empire was to be organised on a peace footing. The standing army of Augustus numbered only twenty-two legions. For long that force was just sufficient to safeguard the frontiers and to hold the barbarians at bay. But already in the reign of Marcus Aurelius the narrowness of the margin of safety was revealed. Troops on the Danube had to be moved from the Balkan provinces to meet the peril on the Euphrates, and then, when war broke out afresh in Europe on the northern frontier, the legions were once more withdrawn from the East to the Danube. In the third century that narrow margin was no longer adequate : two new factors broke down the cunningly devised structure of the imperial defence : (i) the revival of the national monarchy of the Sassanids in Persia, which created a strong aggressive realm on the eastern frontier ; (ii) the beginning of the “*Völkerwanderung*,” when the Empire was assailed on every side at one and the same time. The Roman military system could not stand the strain, and in the chaos which ensued the separate provinces were driven to organise their own defence. If the unity of the *orbis terrarum* was to be restored, the Roman world must be forcibly clamped together : only bonds of iron could hold the starting timbers in place. Now for the first time Rome imposes on her subjects a rigid uniformity : the administration of the Empire is refashioned as a vast system and the work of government is finally assumed by a single imperial service—by that “*household of Cæsar*” which through the centuries had gradually ousted from the control of the state the constitutional executive, the magistracies which the Republic had bequeathed to the Principate. Rome bows the necks of all her citizens beneath the yoke of a bureaucracy—a bureaucracy which, though oppressive and corrupt, though burdensome and immensely expensive, was

yet in its prodigious ordered hierarchy, with its elaborate administrative tradition, practically indestructible: it was the steel framework which supported the Byzantine Empire.

One other aspect of the third-century development calls for brief notice. The Battle of Actium—whatever its military significance may be, whether it have any strictly military significance or no—yet remains one of the decisive encounters of world history. For at Actium it was decided whether Roman conceptions of government and statesmanship should be subordinated to Hellenistic principles of rule: Antony stood for dynastic autocracy, for the divine right of kings, while Octavius stood for the carrying over into the new order of all that could be salvaged from the wreck of the Republican tradition. The Principate—the early Roman Empire as Augustus conceived it—is built with Roman materials: as an institution the Roman Empire is a Roman building: that has been denied, but I am convinced that the paradoxical assertion that the Roman Empire is essentially a Greek institution is misconceived. Antony defeated, Augustus set himself to revive the Roman tradition, and of that fact the poetry of Vergil and Livy's history are the immortal witness. The greatest achievement of the Empire in its early period is the Romanisation of Western Europe—and that is, I would repeat, a distinctively Roman triumph. Yet the supremacy of the Hellenistic East was but postponed, and throughout the first centuries of the Empire the *Drang nach Osten* only grew in the force of its momentum. The features of that swing of the pendulum towards the East are well known: in the economic sphere, in religion, in literature, in the problems of military defence the influence of the Roman East was paramount. Rome was no longer the centre of the Empire. If to the Roman satirist it could appear that at the end of the first century the Syrian Orontes had flowed into the Tiber, by the third century the tide had turned and was carrying Rome on its ebb to the Hellenistic East.

It was necessary to recall this development to your minds, since the Byzantine civilisation is continuous with the civilisation of the ancient world. Here there is not the breach which characterises the development of Western Europe. That breach may be minimised—as by Dopsch and Iorga—but the fact of the breach remains. The Frankish kingdom marks the rise of a new social organisation and the steady decline of those influences which bound Gaul to the Roman world. Gaul in the pages of Gregory of Tours is only kept in touch with the Empire through

U 2

rare embassies to the imperial court : Gaul is no longer orientated towards the Mediterranean : it is cut from its ancient moorings. Here was in large measure a fresh beginning. But in the East the old threads just held : through perfidy and assassination—the very means employed show that it was a matter of “ touch and go ”—the supremacy of the barbarian was averted. Here there is continuity. But the question of course arises—Continuity with what ? The last paragraph was designed to suggest the answer to that question. In the West Rome consciously promoted Romanisation, but in the East during the first three centuries of the Empire Rome did not attempt to interfere with the natural development of Hellenistic culture. When Rome moved eastward, when under Constantine a second Rome was founded on the Bosphoros, when to this second Rome the central administration and the court were moved (in A.D. 330), a definitely Roman tradition invaded the Eastern provinces. The continuity of East Rome is a continuity of these two traditions—the Hellenistic and the Roman : the one giving the literature and language, while it continued to mould religious thought and the forms of social life, the other bringing Roman law and an administrative tradition, together with the Roman conception of the supremacy of the state and that inherited military science which rendered continuity itself possible. Rome brought also the imperial tradition of a sovereign's duties : a tradition which had made of the Emperor a *symbol*, for was he not the ultimate source of that authority which had welded together the *orbis Romanus* ?—an authority to which the Christian faith gave a new and divine sanction : henceforth the Emperor was no mere nominee of the legions : the human choice did but ratify a celestial election—the Emperor ruled as the Vicegerent of God and of His Christ.

It is the weaving together of these two strands—the Hellenistic and the Roman—which made East Rome. That is the work of Constantine, of Theodosius I and of Justinian ; with the accession of the house of Heraclius in the seventh century that process may be regarded as accomplished fact, and for the result of that union a single term had been found, “ Romania ”—signifying at once the culture of the Hellenistic world and the Roman guardianship of that legacy through military defence and the forms of law. “ God save Romania ” scribbled on a tile at the end of the sixth century sums up in one short prayer the whole development : here is the tradition and its defence, and here the source of the confidence of East Rome. A God for Whom the field was the world had given that world to the Romans, and

with that gift was given also the promise of a support which might be withheld as punishment for human sin, but which human repentance could ever claim anew when man, forced to his knees, had learned the weakness of the arm of flesh. The re-births of East Rome are miracles of resurrection because they are the work of a Saviour God who through resurrection had proved that He could not be holden of Death. You may not believe that: for you too Byzantine historiography may be a worthless repertory of declamation and miracles disgraceful to the human mind: but since Byzantine thought is shot with miracle, since miracle is interwoven into the texture of East Rome, if you approach that history in the spirit of Voltaire, be you ever so proficient in *Quellenkritik*, however completely you be schooled in the approved methods of modern historical research, the spirit of Byzantine civilisation must remain for you a closed book, and its history a tale of little meaning. Till you have *lived* with monk and ascetic and anchorite, till you have grown into the conviction that a living God is of necessity a God of Miracle, and not a captive in the prison of His own universe, till deep in your very bones you have come with the Byzantine to know that man shall not live by bread alone, you will not *understand*, you will not be in a position to sit down naturally and easily and gossip with the folk of East Rome. For that surely is the distant goal of our task of historical understanding, whatever period we study; and just at rare moments when we rise from the slow considered reading of some document we are almost persuaded that we could face that supreme test—that we could gossip with the men of the age without experiencing a too acute embarrassment.

The spell of a sæcular tradition, the immediacy of supernatural intervention, the obvious necessity of securing the aid of divine power against the countless powers of evil which surround our life, the constant menace of the barbarians without—this is the atmosphere that we breathe in the Empire of East Rome. And the heart of this empire is Constantinople, and within the walls of Constantinople—at times practically limited in their action to the space within those walls—are the Emperor and the bureaucracy of the central government, and so long as those walls stand inexpugnable, there is a refuge, and there the defence of the Roman world can be reorganised, and from its shelter the armies of the Lord Christ can issue to renew the struggle. For this was the result of the development during the three centuries which succeeded the foundation of Constantinople:

the city of Constantine stood alone without a rival, and the Empire of which Constantinople was the centre was united in a common belief in that Trinitarian orthodoxy which had been formulated at the Council of Chalcedon. Through endless disputes, through chicanery and bloodshed the victory of Constantinople over Alexandria was finally won—the victory of the Emperor and his bishop over the ecclesiastical Pharaoh—the Patriarch of Alexandria—the victory of orthodoxy over the Monophysite heresy. That victory was won at a price—the alienation of Syria and Egypt. When in the seventh century the Mohammedan invasion tore Egypt and Syria from the Empire, territory, it is true, was lost, but it was disaffected territory: cohesion was won on a basis of orthodoxy: this was henceforth the vital nerve of the Empire; orthodoxy took the place of nationality. Nationality as a bond of union was impossible in the ethnic confusion of the Byzantine world: that bond of union was found in a common orthodox religious faith. As it had been for the Jew throughout his history, so for the East Roman, religion was the cement of the social fabric.

In this civilisation of East Rome, it should be stated without hesitation and with emphasis, there are some things which you will fail to find, or find only in a very limited degree. The traditional element, the element of continuity with the past, in this Byzantine culture I have of set purpose already accentuated. For one of the things which you will miss in the thought of this Byzantine world is originality. And you will miss it the more because our generation, like the Athenians of old, is ever seeking to tell or to hear some new thing: there is a tendency to regard tradition as a prison house. But Rome was naturally conservative, and New Rome did not belie her past. In fact it was precisely when you were strongest, when you were most alive, that you were most rigorously conservative: it was then in the pride of present achievement that you felt yourself most worthy to claim as your own the splendours of your inheritance, then that you endeavoured with the greatest consistency to mould your thought upon the ancient models. Every literary revival only drove you back afresh to the forms which were hallowed by tradition: you sought to write more nearly as Herodotus and Thucydides had written; you must therefore write, not as you spoke, but in that Attic dialect which the great Athenians had immortalised. Your style became a studied anachronism: there was less of spontaneity and more of Hellenistic scholarship in your thought. The Byzantine authors, it has been said, are

Christian Alexandrians. Literary form tended to become your first care, your aim not to encourage, but to bridle insurgent individuality. And the danger of every great tradition is that it may be merely passively received : it does not come as a new thing challenging you to a personal appropriation, as the old world came to Western Europe at the Renaissance : it comes as an heirloom claiming only guardianship, not as a prize demanding conquest. Thus it is that in face of Byzantine literature the modern reader is apt to become intolerant, supercilious, even contemptuous.

You will miss, too, freedom of thought, you will feel the lack of scientific curiosity, the weight of authority. In science the Byzantine is a compiler, an encyclopædist : in religion, the sphere in which speculation was most natural for an East Roman, he was, it must be repeated, above all orthodox. Thought on important issues may be stifled, because those issues are already closed by a judgment that cannot be questioned. Only the lesser issues are matters of discussion, since here thought is still free to range unchecked. The passionate debate concentrated on such issues seems to us disproportionate to the problem on which it exhausts itself : few of us perhaps could grow really heated over the question whether the light which appeared on Tabor was created or uncreate. Scientific research is readily branded as blasphemous, when to seek a natural explanation for any phenomenon may be regarded as a denial of the action of a controlling Providence. We must be prepared to face without flinching Gibbon's epigram on his own masterpiece : "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion."

To us a demon-haunted life is strange and unfamiliar : here against the supernatural obviously only the supernatural itself can prevail. But to the Byzantine the Christ enthroned in the splendours of mosaic seemed ineffably withdrawn, removed from the humble cares of his insignificant life : he needed a protection against the powers of evil more reassuring, more intimate, and that he found in amulet, in charm, or sacred relic. His was the creed of Winifred Jenkins in *Humphrey Clinker* : "As for me, I put my trust in the Lord, and I have got a slice of witch elm sowed in the gathers of my under-petticoat." And once again you must ask yourselves how much of truth is contained in that mordant epigram, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion."

You will miss further the keen political life of the Greek city state of the classical period : you will find a polity which is

avowedly an autocracy. Checks upon the action of the autocrat there were, it is true, even in New Rome, but they can only be found, if sought: they do not leap to the eye. And in Byzantine history you will find cruelty, and unreasoning mob violence. That is true, but it must not be forgotten that in Constantinople men lived in constant peril of barbarian attack—the Empire through the centuries was assailed by Goth and Vandal and Hun, by Persian and Avar, by Arab and Seljuk Turk, by Serb and Bulgar, by Patzinak and Russian—a host of foes. The instant menace, the tension of nerve and spirit made self-control difficult and surrender to the passion of the moment fatally easy. The defence of civilisation through a millennium—that was achieved; but the defenders paid the price. This generation, at least, should be able to sympathise with the folk of Constantine's city.

And if all this is to be set to the debit side of the account—I have tried to state the case honestly that I might not tamper with the ledger—what assets can the East Roman Empire show? On its literary balance sheet it can point with pride to its theological achievements. To them we owe our Christology, and to-day the works of the Fathers of the Eastern Church are being studied with a new interest. For if in our theological reconstructions we are forced backward behind the definitions of Chalcedon, we are treading again the paths where the Byzantines were the pioneers. The vital interest of their thought is reflected in such a book as Canon Raven's recent essay on *Apollinarianism*. Systematic theology was born in the East, and it was to John of Damascus that the West went for a model in its early attempts to state Christianity as a philosophic system. To the East we owe many of our finest hymns: Neale's work of translation has permanently enriched our Western inheritance. "The day is past and over" is a translation of a hymn by Anatolius, Andrew of Crete wrote the original of "Christian, dost thou see them . . .," while "Art thou weary" is founded on a hymn of Stephen the Sabaite. The great edition of the hymns of Romanus is now completed, and only funds are needed to permit of the publication of the labours of Krumbacher and of Maas. In profane literature there is the massive corpus of Byzantine historiography; nowhere more clearly than in this body of historical writing can we trace the continuity of East Rome with the classical tradition. In the West monks composed annals and chronicles: in the East men still wrote *history*. The force of tradition, the needs of Byzantine

diplomats and generals united to keep alive a catholic curiosity, to maintain the serious study of the culture and institutions of neighbouring peoples. Russia and the Southern Slavs to-day owe the knowledge of their origins to this Greco-Roman literature, and Magyar and Bulgar admit a like debt. Teutonic nations seek the picture of their past in the pages of Cæsar and Tacitus : the same practical need of imperial statesmen inspired the Byzantine historians. The Empire of New Rome, like the Empire of the older Rome on the Tiber, realised that the foundations of government must be laid in knowledge, that ignorance eats like a canker-worm at the heart of any imperial power. The lesson is valid still : the Byzantine historians insist with Jefferson : " Preach, my dear sir, a crusade against ignorance."

Of the work of the Byzantines as the world's librarians guarding the treasures of the past until the West was ready to receive the precious legacy from their hands nothing need be said ; that, at least, of the services of East Rome is common knowledge. It is, however, at times forgotten that the East Romans were no mere custodians of the literature of a bygone age : they were themselves the creators of national literatures. Though the Eastern Church is a Greek Church, yet when that Church found a nation, it was ready to give to it a national literature in its own tongue. Just as in the fourth century the Armenian Church owed its organisation to the Church of Cæsarea, so in the fifth century it was on Roman soil that the Armenian alphabet was invented, while Armenian literature was formed of translations from the Greek. Thus it is from Armenian manuscripts that modern scholarship has recovered many early Christian works of which the Greek originals have perished. The Syriac literature was founded under East Roman influence, and that influence gave the models on which later the Monophysite Church developed its independent literary activity. East Roman missionaries invented their earliest script for the Slavs, and here again East Roman theological works formed the library of Slav Christianity. This is the great contrast between the East and the West. The Western Church knew but one language—Latin—and in Latin its services continued to be celebrated. Latin became the tongue of whatever culture there was, and thus the growth of national literatures was let and hindered. Rome in the West had performed her work of Romanisation so thoroughly that the Church which stepped into the place of the civil power as the representative of the Latin tradition was bound and fettered by linguistic conformity. The East was free : the

Church called into being an ecclesiastical literature in the vulgar tongue and a civil literature followed in its wake.

This liberality and generosity of East Rome is, indeed, but a part of its missionary achievement. Here State and Church joined hands, for the convert to Chalcedonian orthodoxy became the Emperor's natural ally—an outpost of the imperial system of defence. That missionary work of the Byzantine Church which carried its priests to Nubia on the South, to the Caucasus and the Euphrates on the East, to the steppes of Southern Russia, to Serbia and Bulgaria in the North, is one of the Empire's proudest titles to fame.

In the study of Byzantine art there was never a livelier interest than to-day, never have art lovers found it easier to appreciate its triumphs. Byzantine civilisation implies in its varied manifestations the possession of wealth, and the splendours of this art reflect that fact. The pomp and pride of the earthly court of New Rome was in Byzantine theory but a type of celestial glories—of that court where ruled the God whose Vicegerent the Emperor was. In the mosaics of Byzantine art terrestrial magnificence is used as symbol and type of an unearthly glory: the studied hieratic calm of the imperial audience chamber is but a reflex of the divine peace of the saints; the Emperor as master of the world leads the thought of the East Roman worshipper to that supreme Pantokrator whose footstool is the earth, whose throne is the heavens. In these glorified figures the “significant form” of Clive Bell and the modern art critics is realised with a completeness before which contemporary mosaic appears meaningless, while in architecture the miracle of S. Sophia remains one of the wonders of the world, its dome, as Procopius says, seeming rather to be hung from the skies than supported from earth. In his art the Byzantine escaped from life's turmoil into the calm of a profound peace: only those who have sought in their own souls to escape from life's fitful fever know something of the worth of that ideal of *ἀταραξία*—of the peace which the world can neither give nor take away—which is the inmost secret alike of Byzantine religion and of Byzantine art.

But in the last resort for some of us the thrill of Byzantine history is bound up with the defence of civilisation from the barbarian hordes. This was the historic task of Constantinople. Byzantine history is one spacious epic. Through the centuries Roland and his Paladins stand at the gateway of Europe and bar the narrow passage. And this defence is sustained on the razor edge of peril by the supremacy of a tradition of military

science capable, as Rome had ever proved herself, of manifold adaptation to changing conditions. East Rome preserved the money economy which the West had lost : the strictly covenanted services of a feudal system could never have maintained the unceasing watch at the gateway. To the hard-pressed subjects of Byzantium, to the armed defence and the diplomacy which their besants kept in being, Europe owes a debt, which she has not always been prepared to acknowledge. The saving of Romania is an achievement which has fairly won an imperishable memorial.

NORMAN H. BAYNES.