

PART III MEDIEVAL CULTURES

Chapter 8 The Byzantine and the Islamic Empires

1. Out of the breakup of the Roman Empire arose three new political formations—the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the empire created by Islam, and various states of Western Europe.
2. These Empires had frequent and regular economic and intellectual contact with one another.
3. Although the West went on the offensive militarily during the Crusades, it remained largely a borrower of ideas and technology from the East.

A. The Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantium

1. The Byzantine Empire was the surviving half of the Roman Empire centered in “New Rome,” the name for Constantinople throughout the Middle Ages.
2. The Byzantine Empire combined Latin, Hellenistic, and Christian traditions with the oriental culture of the revitalized Persian Empire.
3. Byzantium preserved the sources of ancient civilization, notably Greek literature and Roman law.

A. Justinian (527–565)

1. Of humble birth, Justinian was the greatest of the Byzantine emperors.
2. Justinian sought to reassert Roman power in the West and to spread Christianity to pagan lands.
3. Through bloody military expeditions, he retook control of Italy, North Africa, and Spain.

II. The Threat of Islam and Separation from the West

1. In the seventh century, the forces of Islam advanced beyond the Arabian Peninsula toward both Persia in the east and Byzantium in the west.
2. By the end of the century, they had taken much of Persia, as well as Syria, Palestine, and Egypt and were moving along the North African coast toward Spain.
3. Little remained of “eternal Rome” by 750, and what was left took on an openly Greek character.
4. This reorientation led to a renaissance of art and letters inspired by ancient Greek texts.

A. Eastern Monasticism

1. Byzantium’s dominant religious tendencies fostered separation with Western Catholicism.
2. Eastern monasticism was more mystical and ascetic and less concerned with the intellectual or scholarly.

B. Iconoclasm

1. Iconoclasm was a controversial issue that caused a major rift in East-West relations in the eighth century.

2. The practice of worshipping before Christian images (icons) was regarded by Emperor Leo III and others in the West as pagan and idolatrous.
3. Those who wanted the icons removed from the churches (the iconoclasts) did not prevail.
4. The defeat of the iconoclast preserved the Greco-Roman artistic tradition within Byzantine art.

C. The Schism of 1054: Division Between the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches

1. Other differences between the Eastern and Western church led to the Schism of 1054.
2. The Western church tended to be more legalistic, the Eastern, more mystical and philosophical.
3. The Eastern Christians rejected the notion of “original sin,” and there were other differences as well.
4. The formal break was precipitated by the expanding authority of the Roman papacy over the Christian churches in Southern Italy.
5. Attempts at reconciliation failed, and Christendom formally divided into two churches.

D. The Crusades

1. The Schism of 1054 weakened the Christian world’s ability to confront a new common enemy, the Islamic Turks.
2. In the eleventh century, the Turks conquered Persia, Syria, Palestine, and much of Asia Minor.
3. The aid provided by the West to the Byzantine Empire turned into an occupation army.
4. The Roman Catholics plundered Constantinople.

III. Collapse of the Byzantine Empire (1261–1453)

1. The attack on Constantinople led to a dispersal of leading officials, scholars, and artists to outlying areas.
2. These Greek elements reformed their communities in exile and then retook Constantinople in 1261 under Michael Palaeologus.
3. This dynasty lasted almost 200 years, but its dominion extended just a few miles beyond the city walls.

IV. Byzantium as a Transmitter of Ancient Greek Culture to the West

1. Despite its gradual demise at the hands of the Turks, the literature and art of the tiny Byzantine kingdom flourished.
2. The commitment by scholars to ancient Greek texts and Greek culture generally intensified.
3. In the last century of Byzantium, the West awoke to the importance of ancient Greek literature and Plato’s philosophy, of which only fragments existed in Latin in the West.
4. By 1500, the study of Greek, almost extinct in the West for a thousand years, became a staple of school curriculum.
5. The Turks took Constantinople in 1453; the last citadel of what had been a major civilization had become Muslim.

V. The Islamic Empire

A. The Early History of the Arabs

1. The extraordinary expansion of the Arabs under the banner of Islam was a shock to the Byzantine and Persian governments.
2. The Arabian Peninsula was a backwater of the ancient world.

3. Cataclysmic wars between the Byzantines and Persia had weakened both states just as the Arabs were gathering strength.
4. By the middle of the eighth century, Arab tribes ruled from Southern France to central Asia.

B. Islam, a New Monotheism

1. Muhammad began preaching in Mecca in the year 610 A.D.
2. Muhammad claimed to be God's messenger and invoked the names of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus in his preaching.
3. Muhammad's message did not gain popularity until he left Mecca and went to Medina.
4. Islam is a reform of Christianity just as Christianity is a reform of Judaism.
5. The Quran is addressed to the Arabs but its message is universal.

C. Islamic Culture and the Five Pillars

1. Religious rituals are more a component of day-to-day secular activities in Islamic culture than in Western culture.
2. The pilgrimage to Mecca, (the haj) to be accomplished once in a lifetime, spiritually and corporally unites Muslims throughout the world.
3. The affirmation of faith, frequent prayers, the pilgrimage to Mecca, the month of fasting, and the giving of alms constitute the "Five Pillars of Islam."

D. Expansion of Islam and Conversion to the Faith

1. Muhammad brought the influential city of Mecca into the Muslim fold through warfare and diplomacy.
2. The Meccans assumed and maintained a leadership role in the new faith.
3. Expanding outward from Arabia kept the feuding Arab tribes from fighting among themselves.
4. The Arabs spread into Asia and halted the spread of the Chinese Empire westward.
5. Islam's prohibition against images in a religious context restricted sculpture and painting, but elevated calligraphy to a high art.
6. Islamic civilization also found special expression in architecture.

E. Law and Doctrine

1. It was over a hundred years after its founding that Islam established a code of law distinct from traditional Arab Custom.
2. Islam's relationship to its religious law made it more akin to Judaism than Christianity.
3. Greek philosophical texts were translated into Arabic but were always subordinated to the word of God found in the Quran.

F. Arabic Literature

1. Poetry has a long tradition in the Arab world that continued under Islam.
2. Arab love poetry in particular may have influenced the development of courtly love poetry in France and Italy in the twelfth century.
3. The Arab storytelling tradition became known to the West primarily through the publication of *1001 Arabian Nights*.

G. The Impact of Islamic Civilization on Europe

1. The Muslims co-existed with the West in the Mediterranean Sea and through their control of North Africa, Sicily, and the Iberian Peninsula from the 8th to the 15th centuries.
2. Hostility gave way to trade and eventually a dynamic cultural synthesis developed between the two cultures.
3. The West learned and borrowed much from the Islamic World during this time.
4. Upon retaking control of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims, the Christians admired the vestiges of high civilization that remained.