

Byzantine Empire Map Webquest

Internet Emergency Edition

Remnants of the Roman Empire, circa 500 CE



Map of the Byzantine Empire 565 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 565 AD

- This map depicts the Empire at the death of Justinian I, who had reigned from 527 to 565 as sole Emperor, sometimes in concert, and sometimes in conflict, with his powerful wife Theodora.
- Through a series of hard-fought and destructive wars against Goth and Vandal successor states in the former territory of the western Roman Empire, Justinian had re-extended the Empire's boundaries to southern Spain, the Italian peninsula and North Africa. The territorial gains, though impressive, masked an overall weakening the Empire's position; a dreadful outbreak of bubonic plague had swept the mediterranean basin in the 540s and severe climatic conditions had a negative impact upon the Empire's agricultural base.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 668 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 668

AD

- The previous century has been traumatic for the Byzantium. The Empire's borders to the north, along the Alps and the River Danube, were placed under pressure in the late 6th Century, and finally breached by a succession of barbarian invasions from Lombards, Avars, and Slavs. Meanwhile in the east a catastrophic, though ultimately victorious struggle with the Persian Empire had been surmounted by the sudden eruption of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula.
- For a number of reasons, still debated - religious and political alienation of local populations, economic and military exhaustion, failure of strategic oversight - the Byzantine government is unable to prevent the loss of Egypt, Palestine and Syria. The newly established Umayyad Caliphate, with its capital in Damascus, places continuous pressure upon Byzantium, which withdraws behind the Taurus mountains and consolidates what is left of its military in Asia Minor.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 780 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 780 AD

- By 780 the situation along Byzantium's eastern frontier had stabilised, and the Empire's "dark age" was drawing to a close. Byzantium was now transformed from the sprawling mediterranean empire of late antiquity into a relatively compact medieval state with its most important lands, in terms of agricultural production, tax-base, and military manpower, in Asia Minor.
- However reduced in territorial extent, Byzantium has proved its tenacity and ability to adapt and survive under severe pressure from east, west and north. The next two and a half centuries will see an amazing recovery in the Empire's fortunes, based upon the administrative and military structures put in place during its long battle for survival.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 1025 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 1025 AD

- At the death of the Emperor Basil II in 1025, Byzantium was at the apex of its medieval power. The ninth century had first seen Greece re-conquered and brought under regular Byzantine control. Then, the balance of power on the eastern frontier had slowly but decisively shifted in Byzantium's favour, with tables turned upon the declining Abbasid Caliphate and the Arab 'raiding emirates'. Finally, Basil himself had prevailed in brutal conflict with the Bulgars and once again extended Byzantium's borders to the Danube. For the first time in its long history, Byzantium appeared to face no significant threat from any quarter.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 1092 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 1092

AD

- At the death of the Emperor Basil II in 1025 Byzantium stood apparently unassailable; the premier power of medieval Europe and the Middle East. Half a century later the situation was very different. Byzantium had lost control over its heartland in Asia Minor to the Seljuk Turks and the empire also had to fight desperately to resist invasion from the Normans, based in southern Italy.
- The reasons for this dramatic reversal are manifold, and controversial, but include periods of misrule, military breakdown, the nature of Turkish settlement in Asia Minor, and structural changes in economy and society which made maintenance of the self-contained and centralised Byzantine state more difficult.
- However dire the situation though, Byzantium was about to stage another of its remarkable recoveries. Since 1081 the Empire at least had an able and extremely determined ruler; the Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, aided by a number of able family members and colleagues, not the least of which was the Emperor's mother, Anna Dalassena, who administered the Empire's affairs whilst Alexios was on campaign.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 1143 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 1143 AD

- This map depicts the Empire at the close of the reign of John II Komnenos, son of Alexios. Through a combination of determination, skill and opportunism, Alexios and John revived the Empire. After defeating Norman attempts at conquest from the west, Alexios was able to exploit the effects of the 1st Crusade to reassert Byzantine control over the more fertile and populated regions of coastal Asia Minor.
- At the accession of John's son, Manuel I Komnenos, Byzantium appeared stronger and wealthier than it had done for generations.

Map of the Byzantine Successor States 1218 AD



Map of the Byzantine Successor States 1218 AD

- The death of Manuel Komnenos in 1180 exposed the improvised nature of the Komnenian revival and ushered in a new period of instability and weakness, culminating in the disaster wrought by the 4th Crusade in 1204. This early exercise in western commercial and military imperialism led to the conquest and partial destruction of Constantinople. A new so-called "Latin Empire" was established upon the ruins of Byzantium, whilst Byzantine refugees established fragmented successor states in Northern Greece and Asia Minor, each claiming the the Byzantine inheritance.
- The Empire of Nicaea emerged as the most viable successor state and was to go on to recapture Constantinople in 1261.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 1278 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 1278

AD

- The closing decades of the 13th Century mark Byzantium's last period as a significant player in European and Middle-Eastern affairs. Following the Byzantine recapture of Constantinople in 1261, the brilliant and unscrupulous Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos had dealt with multiple threats to the restored Empire.
- Byzantine diplomatic and espionage activity supplemented the Empire's rather meagre military resources, culminating in 1282 with the bankrolling of a major revolt in Sicily against Byzantium's chief adversary and threat - Charles of Anjou, who had threatened to lead a so-called crusade against Constantinople.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 1350 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 1350 AD

- Despite occasional periods of recovery, the Byzantine Empire was in terminal political decline by the middle of the 14th Century. A bitter civil war, which saw the Ottoman Turks become intimately involved in Byzantine affairs for the first time, was coupled with the outbreak of bubonic plague in 1349, as well as a general failure in the dying Empire's financial and military resources.
- The Empire's main possessions were now restricted to Thrace, Thessalonika, the Peloponnese, and Constantinople itself.

Map of the Byzantine Empire 1453 AD



Map of the Byzantine Empire 1453 AD

- On the eve of its final battle for survival, Byzantium was reduced to a few isolated territories surrounded by the Ottoman Empire, which had experienced a rapid expansion in power and territorial extent. Constantinople, still under Byzantine control, but situated in the heart of Ottoman territories, had become an anomaly and irritant, which the Sultan Mehmet II finally removed on 29 May 1453 after an epic siege and heroic last-ditch defence.
- The long story of the Roman-Byzantine Empire was over. But even in its final centuries, the Empire generated a cultural life of great vitality and influence which belied its lack of temporal power.