

BYZANTIUM, THE COMMON ROOT

1. INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of this era, four great empires extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific, favouring cultural and economic contact between these two ends of the world. Goods, techniques and customs, as well as ideas, myths and religions, travel along the trading routes.

From the 3rd century onwards, these great empires are threatened by internal crises and invasions. China is divided into three independent states and the kingdom of the Han disappears.

In Persia, the Sassanian Empire extends toward India and survives the attacks from Rome and from the Northern People.

In India, the Kushan Empire is substituted by the Gupta Empire, which shortly after is destroyed by the White Huns.

In Rome, the external threats are added to a long period of political, economic and religious instability, which takes Diocletian to divide the empire in two parts, ruled by four emperors.

In the 4th Century, Constantine, undertakes big improvements in order to achieve the stability and continuity of the Roman Empire. One of them was to move the Capital to **an easily defended location** between Europe and Asia.

Francisco Eugenio¹ (00:39) (mm:ss)

“The city of Constantinople was founded on top of the Ancient Byzantium, a Greek colony, situated in the Bosphorus Strait, a meeting point between Europe and Asia. It is a strategic place between East and West and when Constantine installs the imperial seat here it is due to an essential strategic need, because Rome is far away from the military operation front. This pushes the German barbarians as far as the Danube in Central Europe, and the Persians as far as the Euphrates, already in Asian territory”.

The Roman Empire extends all over the Mediterranean area, but its oriental area is the most wealthy, cultured and populated, it being the heir to the Ancient cultures of Egypt, Greece, Crete, Anatolia and the Middle East.

Constantinople can dominate the commerce between the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea, as Troy had done in Antiquity, and it is closer to the goods from the East, which arrive via the Silk Road.

Thanks to the Imperial support, the administrative and commercial control converts it, in a short time, into the most important city of the empire.

¹ **Francisco Eugenio**. Professor of Roman Law UNED (Spanish Long Distance University). Interviewed in Madrid, 27th Dec 2007.

As with other empires, the 5th Century Roman Empire suffers pressure on its borders which increases while its internal disintegration grows more evident.

Pedro Bádenas² (00:37)

“The Barbarians did not arrive overnight, and they were not aliens. They had been living on the borders of the Empire for generations. From East to West and from North to South, there were People approaching. Rome needed them as well and in a certain way they become part of its orbit and in some cases stronger than in others, particularly in the West, where they virtually replaced the preceding power structures.”

The division of the Roman Empire and the removal of its capital to New Rome, ensures imperial survival 1000 years after the so called fall of the Roman Empire, in which it **loses its** Western provinces.

The Eastern Roman Empire incorporates Greek elements and elements of **many** other countries into Roman civilization. In Byzantium we have a synthesis of all these elements with Christianity and its culture, transmitted through books, arts and a new Imperial model. Its influence goes beyond its boundaries and continues in other countries and cultures, right up to the present day.

² **Pedro Bádenas de la Peña.** Professor in Research of the Centre for Higher Scientific Studies, Former Director of the Cervantes Institute in Athens. Interviewed in Athens, 21st June 2007.

2. CHRISTIANITY AS A SYNTHESIS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

In the 3rd Century, the ancient world suffers a profound crisis. In the last epochs cultural and social values collapse, and materialism rules.

Athanasios Markópoulos³ (00:44)

“...since the foundation of Constantinople in 330 A.D. many religions cohabited within the Roman Empire and not only the religion of the Antiquity which had also changed. But I insist, there were many more: mystical, traditional, and others of Egyptian influence as well as the Christian religion. Christianity was becoming stronger each day. This is true. It is also true that ancient religions were falling apart little by little”.

In the face of this degeneration, a lot of beliefs, moral and philosophical reactions are developed: Epicureanism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism on one hand; on the other, Eastern religions: Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Mithraism; from Egypt Gnosticism gets incorporated as well as the cult of Isis with the boy Horus and Osiris, the God who dies and is resurrected. From Greece, arrive Orphism and the religions of the Mysteries, like **the one of** Eleusis; the cult of Dionysius, a God who dies, descends to hell and is resurrected. Then there is Delphi: the sacred mountain of pilgrimages, pillar of ancient mythology. And finally, some minority Salvationist groups like the Essenes and the Therapists.

Among this mosaic of beliefs, Christianity extends rapidly due to its apostolic character, by transmitting new hope to the humble and disinherited, with its values of forgiveness and greater humanity.

At the beginning of the 4th century Constantine, facing the disintegration of the Old World, seeks a new social cohesion that shall sustain the empire.

At first, in 313, he enacts the Edict of Milan recognizing the freedom of worship and afterwards he summons the Christians to the Council of Nicaea, where Christianity and its creed, a selection of the gospels and the writings, its theology and also a hierarchy similar to the Roman administrative structure are made official. This new official religion of the imperial court is the synthesis of ancient worship with profound and diverse roots in the remote past, elements of which it is prepared to accept. It possesses a great capacity to adapt and absorb the myths, worship and traditions of the places it reaches.

³ **Athanasios Markópoulos.** Head of the Faculty of Studies on Turkey and Asia of the University of Athens. Interviewed in Athens, 10th October 2007

Mikhail Bibikov⁴ (00:28)

*“With the spreading of Christianity in the 4th century, and afterwards under the government of **Constantine**, it becomes the official religion of the state, but pagan tradition did not disappear in any way from science or education (...) And, on the other hand, those who raised the sons of Constantine the Great, the Emperor who introduced Christianity, were pagan philosophers and historians.”*

Part of the Classical culture of the gymnasiums and the cult of physical beauty, the classical theatre and poetry is substituted by the new culture of the Holy scriptures.

Parallel to this, in the Egyptian desert, small groups of hermits, are developing and already in the 4th century structured communities with their own rules have taken shape. This will be the origin of the Monastic Orders, that will develop strongly and will prosper in the West and the East. In the following centuries they will become the pillars of society.

On the other hand, when Christianity is adopted by the upper classes, who are educated in classical knowledge, it is necessary to strengthen the Christian theology and philosophy. This task is undertaken by the Fathers of the Church, who make use of the arguments of Hellenic philosophy and Alexandrian Neo Platonism.

⁴ **Mikhail Bibikov**. History PhD and Professor, Vice director of the Institute of Universal History of the Russian Sciences Academy, Professor at the Lomonosov University of Moscow. Interviewed in Moscow, 24th October 2007

3. DEVELOPMENT AND SPREADING OF THE BYZANTINE MODEL

a) Culture of the Book

Mikhail Bibikov (00:26)

“Byzantine culture was a book culture, oriented towards knowledge based on the book, summarizing pagan Hellenic traditions and Christian wisdom, concentrated around the book, that was the ground of all research and all knowledge.”

Despite the existence of an important oral culture, Byzantium will settle on the written culture. Classical Greek knowledge facilitates the study and preservation of the texts from Antiquity.

Guglielmo Cavallo⁵ (00:36)

“Byzantium has always been seen as the transmitter of classical culture and has been so, confined to an elite. That elite has contributed in an important way, right up to the Modern era, to the transmission of ancient texts, the great classics of Antiquity, from Homer to Demosthenes, from Hesiod to Lysias, and many other authors of Antiquity.”

Christianity adopts Classical antiquity and transforms it. In literature, ancient heroes such as Achilles, Odysseus and Hector have new virtues, more in accordance with the new values and they coexist with saints and martyrs. A new literary genre appears: the Hagiography, in which the saint will be the literary character par excellence, the role model to be imitated.

Education is based on the study of the classical texts, but gradually they are substituted by the Holy scriptures. By the middle of the 6th century, the Emperor Justinian decided to close the Academy of Athens, the last centre where classical philosophical studies were cultivated, considering them pagan.

After a so-called Dark Ages of several centuries, in the 9th century a political, economic and cultural recovery takes place. The empire extends its boundaries, and Christianity reaches the Slavic countries. The study of the works of the Fathers of the Church leads to the rediscovery of the secular Greek literature. The **Magnaaura School, gets reorganised** in the Imperial Palace, teaching philosophy, grammar and rethoric, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. The Encyclopaedia serves as the “library” of the Patriarch Photius and the “Suda” encyclopaedia **become** fashionable.

⁵ **Guglielmo Cavallo**. Professor of Greek Palaeography at the University of La Sapienza in Rome, and member of the Academy of I Lincei. Interviewed in Rome, 6th December 2007

Philosophy, history, science and literature are copied again, now in large quantities, due to the use of small letters. And Byzantium is proud of being the heir to the ancient Greek culture, as is also the Arab world.

Two centuries later, Constantinus IX sets up the imperial school of law and the school of philosophy, run by Psellus, maybe the most learned Byzantine of all times.

With the plundering of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204, numerous manuscripts are destroyed, but the decline of Byzantium is only political and military.

After recapturing Constantinople, Michael VIII, initiator of the Palaeologan dynasty, restored the higher teaching of philosophy and the patriarchal academy. This is the beginning of a splendid era, possibly the antecedent of the Italian Renaissance. One of the most interesting and original intellectual centres of the final years was, beyond doubt, Mistras. From 1300 Byzantium seemed to recover all its drive. Between the 13th and the 15th centuries **scholars** such as Maximus Planudes, Theodorus Metochites, Barlaam of Calabria and Georgius Gemistus Plethon appear, whose broad knowledge turn them into real men of Renaissance .

B) Art as a means of spreading of religion

Olga Evgenevna Etingov⁶ (00:38)

“The architecture, the mosaics the frescos, the icons, the art of small forms... and a great deal of other artistic output made up an amazing world, which occupied an important place in the Byzantine civilization as a whole, particularly with regard to knowledge and education.”

Byzantine art has its roots in the Graeco-Roman world, thus in the first epochs the ancient mythological themes are represented with the new Christian values and ancient traditions in the plastic arts are preserved.

Built in the 6th century, during the reign of Justinian, Saint Sophia is the largest Christian church for 1000 years, until the construction of Saint Peter of Rome. This cathedral serves as a model for the Byzantine churches, due to its aesthetic and symbolic value.

Olga Evgenevna Etingov (00:37)

“It can be considered one of the great wonders of mankind...”

“ When the ambassadors of the Prince of Kiev, Vladimir the Saint, arrive at the Saint Sophia church in Constantinople, at the end of the 10th century, they are so amazed that they become entranced, not knowing if they were in Heaven or on Earth.”

The production of icons, in wall paintings or wood, was abundant. They were reproductions of biblical stories, the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints. Initially the figures were represented as hieratic, reminiscent of Egyptian art.

Guglielmo Cavallo (00:42)

“One of the great theologians and thinkers of Byzantium, John Damascene, refers to painting as a ‘book for the illiterates’. Thus the illiterates, who are not able to read or interpret the Christian doctrine through the writings, could do so through painting and figurative drawing of the sacred scenes. Thus, painting was seen as a great book for the illiterates”.

Between the 8th and the 9th centuries, by decree of the so-called ‘iconoclasts’ emperors, religious representations and icons are banned and removed from the churches.

⁶ Olga Evgenevna Etingov. PhD in Arts. Researcher of the Institute of the East at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Professor of Byzantine Art at the Lomonosov University in Moscow and the Russian Humanitarian State University. Interviewed in Moscow, 24th October 2007

Nevra Necipoğlu⁷ (00:27)

“A religious tradition that was opposed to using images that goes back as far as the Old Testament, a tradition characteristic of the Middle East, this is what we see in the Islamic World, in the Byzantine world and in previous periods”.

In the following centuries, the emperors and the Church embark on important works of patronage. Numerous churches and monasteries were built and handicraft production borders on fastidiousness. Byzantine art is an anonymous art in which the artists, conserving ancient techniques, imbued their materials with a great theological value. Gold, silver, mosaics, enamel, polished marble and precious stones that shone, represented the divine light.

⁷ **Nevra Necipoğlu.** Professor of Byzantine History at the Bosphorus University. Interviewed in Istanbul, 19th October 2007

c) Byzantium as an Imperial Model

The strong Eastern Roman administration was an administrative model transmitted with adaptations, to the Russian-Slavic world, Western Europe and the Arab administration of the Caliph.

The Empire's ability to build is crucial for its survival. For a thousand years its immense walls survived attacks by numerous peoples, right up to the appearance of gunpowder and cannons. Other marvellous examples of this ability were the aqueducts and cisterns that were able to provide water to a population, which sometimes exceeded five hundred thousand inhabitants.

The people who failed at the walls were trying to conquer the myth and the dream that is Constantinople: The City of Gold. This image of myth and source of abundance comes from its palaces, the imperial ceremonial, the ornamentation, the mosaics, the silk, the silver and its economic resources that come from controlling the trade.

This myth had its symbols.

Athanasios Markópoulos⁸ (00:37)

“On the present flag of Russia we can see the two-headed eagle, which is the symbol of Byzantium. The Russians have adopted it as they believe that they are, and to a certain degree they are, heirs of Byzantium, and that the Russian Empire is a Byzantine heritage. And not only Russia. Other countries have also as their symbol two-headed eagle because they have roots in the Byzantine Empire”.

Another example given was when Constantine adopted the Persian tiara as a symbol of imperial power. With this act he settled on a style that evolves into the real crowns that all monarchies flaunted.

Jesús Carroles: (00:39)

“At that time in Toledo everything that was called the “imitati imperii”, that is, to completely imitate everything that was happening in Constantinople, and... in fact... Toledo at the end of the 6th century and beginning of the 7th century was a copy of the imperial court that Constantine established in this city.

It is the imperial ideal maintained in the East, the main idea and main reference that is used in Toledo and in Hispania.

Obviously a common world exists, a common culture exists around the Mediterranean and it is obvious that it is the Empire that makes the models, the fashion to be followed.”

⁸ **Jesús Carroles.** Archeologist at the Government of Toledo and Director of the Juan de Mariana Institute. Interviewed in the previous documentary “Toledo - Alexandria, Beacons of Humanity”. He has participated and supported several activities of the Foundation Pangea. Interviewed in Toledo, 19th July 2007.

But maybe, the most important contribution in this field was Roman Law which was preserved and distributed thanks to the compilations of the emperors Theodosius and Justinian. These compilations are the real cornerstone of the Law in European and American nations.

Francisco Eugenio (00:25)

“The Codification Movement of the 19th century very much takes into consideration what Roman Law had established when the different codes of Civil Law in Europe were written, like the French of Napoleon, the German, the Spanish and even outside Europe, as, curiously, the Japanese code of 1898, recently modified by Law in 2004”.

Byzantium’s influence can be traced up to the present day. The Byzantine culture and the Byzantine model were disseminated through various channels.

4. THE PATHS OF TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE

A) The Islamic path

At the beginning of the 7th century, the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires are exhausted after waging a lengthy war. Commercial roads leading away from the conflict zones are strengthened, as is the Arab zone with its centre in Mecca. Under these circumstances, the Arabs and their new religion, Islam, gets expanded rapidly from the East towards India and from the West towards Spain.

Islam develops within the Byzantine Empire, in territories populated with Christian communities, which include craftsmen, administrators, scribes and all types of Byzantine specialists.

Maria Mavroudi⁹ (00:17)

“When something like this happens, it is clear that no new conquest can create a state from scratch. It has to base itself on the social and administrative structures that already exist.”

At the beginning, prayer was oriented towards Jerusalem because Mohammed was considered the last of the Jewish prophets.

The rule of not representing the human form holds back the making of icons.

In Islam, written and oral dissemination predominates.

There is a turn towards classical, Hellenic knowledge, just as will occur centuries later during the European Renaissance. But with some differences. The Arabs are not interested in the literature or theatre but rather in philosophy and science.

Caliphs such as Al-Mamun addressed the emperor of Byzantium to obtain valuable manuscripts of the ancient wise men. The monumental task of translating these manuscripts to Syrian and Arabic falls upon the Greeks of Asia Minor.

Jesús Carroles (00:22)

“...The Nestorian Christians from Syria and from other zones, are initially subjects of the Byzantine world, and they are the ones who translate all the works of the ancient world, all the ancient knowledge and all that will be found in the Arabic world when it will formalize around Damascus, around the great Caliphates we know. All this is the origin too of the Translators School in Toledo.”

⁹ **Maria Mavroudi.** Professor of History and Greek Studies of the Princeton Universidad. Interviewed in Princeton, 6th January 2008

Greek enriches the Arabic language whilst Plato, Aristotle and other Hellenic authors inspire diverse currents of thought and spirituality.

Maria Mavroudi (00:24)

“...the Arabs or the Muslims did not receive the classical Greek heritage in a void, in a time capsule. What they received is what the Byzantine gave them and part of what they received is the Byzantine interpretation of what those texts meant, and of course, they adapted it to their own needs and meanings”.

Elements of the Persian and the Indian culture are added to this syncretism. A universal culture, integrating Greek science and philosophy into a Muslim conception of the world, is created.

In 1453 the Ottoman Turks take over Constantinople and replace the Byzantine administrative control occupying almost the same territories, at the same time renewing the confrontation between what had been the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Constantinople becomes the multi-ethnic centre of a new civilization, which gathers together the Turkish-Mongolian, Islamic and Byzantine traditions.

Nevra Necipoğlu (00:23)

“...to be an heir of the Roman Empire meant that, with the conquest of Istanbul, the Ottomans, really became an empire, a great empire directed from its centre, Istanbul, and just like the Byzantine empire, maintained a multicultural, multinational, multi-lingual and multi-confessional imperial structure”.

B) The Slavic Path

Pedro Bádenas (01:24)

“... Byzantium has an absolutely essential function, the very intelligent politic started by the Byzantine emperors and by the Eastern church - to attract their new countries, which are appearing on the borders of the Danube or People coming from the steppes. This gives birth to a missionary diplomacy that will from the start be in charge of the evangelizing of the Slavs in Central Europe, in what nowadays are the Czech countries: Bohemia and Moravia. They were evangelized by the brothers Cyril and Methodius, who were Greek speaking but also Slavic speaking therefore Byzantine, probably Christianised Slavs. And naturally, they were Hellenized as the language of their liturgy was Greek. And will try to bring these new countries in Europe into orbit around Byzantium and to carry out the evangelization of these People, and they also provided them with writing. Thus, the Cyrillic alphabet is created, not the present one but the Glagolitic one. The present Cyrillic alphabet came later, but adopted the name of Cyril”.

The Slavic zone that is in contact with the Byzantine Empire becomes an area of influence, modelling itself to the style of the Empire.

The influx to the Slavic north increases progressively and expands towards Russia. Byzantium sends architects and craftsmen who participate in the construction of monuments such as Saint Sophia of Kiev, and the churches of the Annunciation and Saint Basil in Moscow.

Olga Evgenevna Etingov (00:38)

“ and exactly in the same way, in the orthodox Slavic countries: Bulgaria, Serbia, Moravia, Russia, the post-Byzantine tradition was very well preserved until the 18th century and even in other places until the 19th century. In this way, the ecclesiastic tradition, granted this extraordinary capacity of conserving this artistic culture”.

In Moscow, which will be named “the Third Rome”, the tsar is crowned in accordance with the imperial model and symbolism.

Speaking about spirituality, from the centre of spirituality that is represented by Mount Athos a new mystical phenomenon gets expanded, the Hesychasm, a word that derives from *Hesychia* or “quietude”. This deepening into the religious experience gives drive for the renewal of the Orthodox Church”. Hesychasm had an extraordinary acceptance in Russia and influenced personalities such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

C) The Italian Path

From the beginning, there was a strong bond between Byzantium and what is nowadays Italy. The creation of the Carolingian Empire marks a breaking point between the Orthodox and Catholic Church, which will end up as the Western Schism in 1054. The era of the Crusades begins.

In the year 1204, the fourth Crusade with the help of the Venetian fleet invades Constantinople, stripping it of its treasures and destroying a great many very valuable books that will be lost forever.

However, from the 13th century, cultural and commercial relationships progressively intensify. In 1439, the Council of Florence tried to mediate between Roman Christians and Orthodox Christians. In this occasion, a Byzantine delegation travels to the city, composed in part of dignitaries of the Mistras Circle, such as Georgius Gemistus Plethon, who carried with him many texts of ancient Greek wisdom. After the take over of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, many other Byzantines follow this route.

Mikhail Bibikov (00:49)

“As we can imagine, in Florence of 1400, the best of the European culture was concentrated. And therefore, when the Byzantine state as a political system collapsed as a result of the Ottoman invasion, many humanists, men of education, immigrated to the universities of Italy, in Pisa, Bologna, and Florence and occupied the main seats in the scientific and educational centres in Italy”.

Translations of the Greek text multiply. Based on the teachings of Gemistus Plethon, Cosimo de Medici ‘the Elder’ founds the Platonic Academy in Florence, which will translate Plato’s texts, in addition to other texts of Alexandrian origin that dealt with the hermetic-chemist tradition.

When a new conception of the world opens up to the man of the Renaissance, he refers back to Classical Antiquity. Interest in the beauty of the human body, naturalism and technical perfection of the Classics are valid once again. Greek myths also return and settle in the European soul, being interpreted as allegories of profound truths. The ancient knowledge that the Byzantines preserved for 1100 years, fuels the appearance of the humanists of the 15th century. No aspect of science, spirituality or European art will be able to escape this profound influence.

5. CONCLUSION

Byzantium is the continuation of the Roman Empire, the heir to Hellenism and to the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean, and as such it is a synthesis of the ancient world shaped by Christian religion.

Constantine applies the Roman organising mentality to the new religion in an attempt to perpetuate the Empire.

Byzantium preserves the classical culture in an era of social and cultural instability.

Athanasios Markópoulos: (00:23)

“I have to tell you, that everything that has been rescued from the ancient Hellenic tradition, all the tradition, the writers, the tragedies and the comedies, the historians, the orators, etc., all this has been saved through Byzantium”.

He also creates an administrative, architectural, artistic and religious model that will be imitated by West, the Russo-Slavic Europe and the area of the Islam, each adapting it to its own form. Byzantium is a common root, a meeting place for civilizations.

Pedro Bádenas (00:25)

“Perhaps the study and better knowledge of Byzantium and its significance as a great civilizing matrix at these moments of European integration are more essential than ever, because, except in a few very specific fields in the Western science, the great unknown has always been Byzantium”.

Nevra Necipoğlu (00:28)

“In educated circles, we can see that there is a growing tendency to perceive the present Turkey as an heir, geographically or culturally, of the Byzantine Empire of the East, that is, a tendency to admit Byzantium’s place in Turkey’s cultural heritage.”

The history of the Byzantine Empire, interspersing moments of glory and decay, helps us to comprehend and improve present history, overcoming nationalism and prejudice that have mystified it for five centuries, both in the East and in the West.

If we know about the past and understand the contribution to our common history made by other cultures, we may, in the future, be able to help build the Human Universal Nation.