



Smithsonian Associates

Byzantine Art and its Legacy

Aneta Georgievska-Shine

Thursday, 9/28, 10/5, 10/12, 2023 - 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. ET

Chronology of main events in the history of the Byzantine Empire

313 Emperor Constantine I grants freedom of religion, ending persecution of Christians

330 Dedication of Constantinople (Istanbul) as the new capital of the Roman Empire

380 Emperor Theodosius I declares Christianity the official religion of the empire

395 Empire divided into two separate halves, East and West

410 Alaric the Visigoth sacks Rome

452 Attila the Hun invades Italy

455 Vandals sack Rome

476 Ostrogoths depose the last Roman emperor in the West

527–565 Reign of Justinian I; builds church of Hagia Sophia; codifies Roman law; reconquers North Africa, Sicily, and Italy

568 Lombards, a Germanic tribe, invade Italy

c. 570 Birth of Muhammad, prophet of Islam

614 Persians capture Jerusalem

627 Emperor Heraclius defeats Persians at Nineveh

634–638 Arab conquest of Syria

640 Arab conquest of Egypt

754 Emperor Constantine V bans the making of religious images (Iconoclasm)

762 Founding of Baghdad by Abbasid caliph al-Mansur

800 Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne Holy Roman emperor in Rome

843 Veneration of religious images is restored, ending Iconoclasm

867–1056 Macedonian dynasty

988 The medieval Slavic state of the Kievan (or Kyivan) Rus' adopts Christianity as the official religion during the reign of Prince Vladimir (r. 980-1015)

1054 Great Schism between Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches

1071 Battle of Manzikert; Seljuk Turks defeat the Byzantines in Asia Minor

1081–1185 Komnenian dynasty

1096–1099 First Crusade; Jerusalem is captured from the Seljuk Turks

1187 Saladin, sultan of Egypt and Syria, retakes Jerusalem

1204–1261 Latin Empire of Constantinople

1204 Fourth Crusade; crusaders sack and occupy Constantinople, partition empire

1261 Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos reclaims the Byzantine throne

1329 Asia Minor falls to the Ottoman Turks

1453 Constantinople falls to Ottoman sultan Mehmed II

Iconoclasm – Main Ideas and Chronology

Iconoclasm, Greek for “image-breaking,” is the deliberate destruction of a culture’s own religious icons and other symbols or monuments. Iconoclasm is generally motivated by an interpretation of the Ten Commandments that declares the making and worshipping of images, or icons, of holy figures (such as Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints) to be idolatry and therefore blasphemy.

Most surviving sources concerning the Byzantine Iconoclasm were written by the iconodules (people who worship religious images), so it is difficult to obtain an accurate account of events.

However, the Byzantine Iconoclasm refers to two periods in the history of the Byzantine Empire when the use of religious images or icons was opposed by religious and imperial authorities. The “First Iconoclasm,” as it is sometimes called, lasted between about 730 CE and 787 CE, during the Isaurian Dynasty. The “Second Iconoclasm” was between 814 CE and 842 CE. The movement was triggered by changes in Orthodox worship that were themselves generated by the major social and political upheavals of the seventh century for the Byzantine Empire.

- Isaurian Emperor Leo III interpreted his many military failures as a judgment on the empire by God, and decided that it was being judged for the worship of religious images. He banned religious images in about 730 CE, the beginning of the Byzantine Iconoclasm.
- At the Council of Hieria in 754 CE, the Church endorsed an iconoclast position and declared image worship to be blasphemy.
- At the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE, the decrees of the previous iconoclast council were reversed and image worship was restored, marking the end of the First Iconoclasm.
- Emperor Leo V instituted a second period of iconoclasm in 814 CE, again possibly motivated by military failures seen as indicators of divine displeasure, but only a few decades later, in 842 CE, icon worship was again reinstated.

An *acheiropoieton* is a type of icon (or any other kind of religious image, mostly two-dimensional) believed to have been **miraculously created by supernatural means or by divine intervention** – that is, without the use of human hands. The word itself is made from **the Greek prefix *a* (meaning “not”) preceding the word *cheiropoietos*, meaning “handmade.”**

Byzantine Empire and the Balkans

Byzantine systems of alliances through kinship were established in the last decade of the 12th century with the rulers of Serbia, and Hungary to the north of the Balkans.

The Bulgarian Empire, renewed after 1185–86, represented the only hostile rival to the Byzantine Empire in the Balkans in both political and religious terms.

The established system collapsed with the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders of the Fourth Crusade in April 1204.

After 1261, the Byzantines re-established their influence in the Balkans and created a new power triangle in the region, consisting of Byzantium, Bulgaria, and Serbia, based on kinship alliances and common Orthodox faith, which will last until the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the 15th century.

A series of civil wars that shook Byzantium in the first half of the 14th century enabled the establishment of the short-lived Serbian Empire by Stefan Dušan in 1346 (emperor 1346–55), which encompassed the vast, former Byzantine territories in northern and central Greece. More importantly, however, the civil wars opened the Balkans to the Ottomans, who achieved a decisive victory on 27 September 1371 on the Ebron/Maritza river. This led to the fall of the Bulgarian Empire in 1393 and the general weakening of the Christian polities in the Balkans, especially during the rule of Sultan Bayezid I (r. 1389–1402), the son of Sultan Murat I who was killed at the battle of Kosovo in 1389.

The eight decades that passed until the final fall of Constantinople and Byzantium to the hands of sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror (r. 1451–81) in 1453, witnessed the gradual but seemingly inevitable expansion of the Ottomans over the Balkans, completed by the conquests of Serbia in 1459, Peloponnesos (Byzantine Morea) in 1460, Wallachia to the north of the Danube in 1462, and Bosnia in 1463.

With the conquest of Belgrade in 1521 by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent or Lawgiver (r. 1520–66), the entire formerly Byzantine and Orthodox Balkans came under the dominance of the Ottomans.

Byzantium and Sicily

AD 535 - Sicily is captured by the Eastern Roman empire during the campaigns of General Belisarius which ultimately result in the creation of the exarchate of Ravenna in mainland Italy.

AD 638 - The exarchate of Ravenna creates the duchy of Naples, the sixth such division of Eastern Roman territories in Italy.

AD 652 - Sicily undergoes its first invasion by the Islamic empire. The forces of Caliph Uthman attack the Eastern Roman defenses but soon withdraw.

AD 661 - Eastern Roman Emperor Constans II is highly interested in affairs in southern Italy, which causes him to move his capital to Syracuse on Sicily.

AD 740 - Ubeidallah ibn al-Habhab al-Maousili, the Islamic Wali of Ifriqiyya and the Maghreb launches an invasion of Sicily which results in him seizing Syracuse.

AD 755 - 756 - The exarchate of Ravenna is briefly re-captured by the resurgent Lombards, but the following year the Carolingian Franks recapture the territory. The ex-Byzantine exarchate is handed back to Rome as the Papal States and northern Italy becomes part of the Carolingian empire. Sicily as a Byzantine possession is now more isolated.

AD 826 - Euphemius, commander of the Byzantine fleet of Sicily, forces a nun to marry him. Emperor Michael II orders General Constantine to seize Euphemius and remove his nose in punishment. Euphemius revolts, killing Constantine and occupying Syracuse in the process. Subsequently he is driven off the island and takes refuge with Ziyadat Allah I in Tunis. He offers Sicily to the emir in exchange for safety and a position as a general.

AD 827 - 828 - Ziyadat Allah promises to put Euphemius in command of Sicily in return for annual tribute. He sends an invasion force that is aided by Euphemius' own fleet. A large Byzantine force sent from Palermo which is assisted by a fleet from Venice under the personal command of the doge, Giustiniano Participation, is defeated. Sicily is in the hands of the Arabs as part of the Islamic empire. This loss virtually ends Roman domination of the Western Mediterranean.

Byzantine Empire and Russia

Kyivan Rus' emerged as a powerful confederation of city-states during the second half of the ninth century in Eastern Europe, where rivers helped link the Baltic Sea with the Black Sea and facilitated trade with Constantinople. The capital of Kyivan Rus' was Kyiv on the Dnieper River, which is today the capital of Ukraine. The name "Kyivan Rus'" refers both to the state and its people.

Christianization of the Kyivan Rus

Introduction of Christianity into the lands of the Slavs began at least a century before the great event in Kiev. Traditionally, the missionary brothers Ss Cyril and Methodius are credited with bringing the eastern form of Christianity to the Slavs, in their own language, in the 860s, although the southern Slavs had already known Christianity.

Among the eastern Slavs, whose ruling princes, the Rus, were descended from the Varangian (Norse) chieftains/traders, introduction of Christianity appears to have occurred in several stages.

Vladimir I became the ruler of Kievan Rus' after overthrowing his brother Yaropolk in 978. According to the *Primary Chronicle* (one of the few written documents about this time) in 987 Vladimir decided to send envoys to investigate the various religions neighboring Kievan Rus'. The envoys that came back from Constantinople reported that the festivities and the presence of God in the Christian Orthodox faith were more beautiful than anything they had ever seen, convincing Vladimir of his future religion.

He formed an alliance with Basil II of the Byzantine Empire and married his sister Anna in 988. After his marriage Vladimir I officially changed the state religion to Orthodox Christianity and destroyed pagan temples and icons.

That same year, he baptized his twelve sons and many boyars in official recognition of the new faith. He also sent out a message to all residents of Kiev, both rich and poor, to appear at the Dnieper River the following day. The next day the residents of Kiev who appeared were baptized in the river while Orthodox priests prayed. This event became known as the Baptism of Kiev. He built the first stone church in Kiev in 989, called the Church of the Tithes.

Fall of the Kyivan Rus and Moscow as the Third Rome

By the middle of the twelfth century, Kyiv lost control over its expansive territories, and Kyivan Rus' fragmented into several smaller states, which sometimes fought amongst themselves. In the middle of the thirteenth century, Kyiv and many of its former territories fell to Mongol invaders, bringing an end to Kyivan Rus'. But after two centuries of Mongol rule in the region, the city of Moscow emerged as a new center of power. Moscow was a latecomer among the older cities of Kyivan Rus', emerging in the twelfth century and gaining wealth and power in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The Grand Duke of Moscow Ivan III "the Great" achieved independence from the Mongols around 1480 and established Moscow as the center of what now became known as "Russia."

As Moscow ascended, the Byzantine Empire declined. Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, ending the long history of the Eastern Roman Empire that had begun when emperor Constantine dedicated the capital city of Constantinople in 330, which he also referred to as “New Rome.” In the years that followed, Moscow increasingly viewed itself as successor to Byzantium and even began referring to itself as the “Third Rome.” In 1472, Ivan III married Sophia Palaiologina, niece of the last Byzantine emperor, symbolically cementing the continuation of Byzantium in Russia.

Byzantium and Putin’s Vision of Russia

In 2000, Putin re-introduced the bicephalous eagle as the Russian coat of arms, to signify the dual secular and divine power of the emperor, the union between east and west, between power and authority. In May 2018 he visited Mount Athos, presenting himself as a new Orthodox leader, fighting the nihilism of the west, and standing up for true ‘patriotic values, historical memory and tradition.’

“Sincere, resolute faith helped our ancestors overcome the most difficult trials together, to surmount hardships and be victorious. This experience of moral improvement and cultural, socio-political development has become an integral part of the heritage of eastern Christianity, uniting entire peoples belonging to the Orthodox religious tradition. Russia holds a worthy place among them, championing justice, caring for the spiritual integrity of our Orthodox world, advocating for the development of cooperation and reinforcing active dialogue between Orthodox churches.”

Putin has also frequently used eschatological rhetoric. He talked about the world’s end already in a press conference in 2012:

“All of us are always close to God to the same extent and He will decide where we deserve to be at the end of our lives on Earth. But, of course, the situation has not improved. It has worsened after the United States’ withdrawal from the INF Treaty.” Indeed, Putin had made a similar statement the year before: “Any aggressor should know that retaliation is inevitable and they will be annihilated. And we as the victims of an aggression, we as martyrs would go to paradise while they will simply perish because they won’t even have time to repent their sins”.

Drost, N., & de Graaf, B. (2022). Putin and the Third Rome: Imperial-Eschatological Motives as a Usable Past. *Journal of Applied History*, 4(1-2), 28-45. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895893-bja10032>

***All of the information comes from open-source reference works**