

CLAH4006

**From Village to Empire: An
Introduction to the History of Rome**

**The Transformation of Empire:
Byzantium**

Matthew Cobb

- Byzantion (Latinized to Byzantium) – Greek colony on Thracian Bosphorus – re-founded by Constantine in AD 324 as “the city of Constantine”.
- Constantinople would remain an Imperial capital for eleven centuries (and another five under the Ottoman Turks – as Istanbul).
- Rumour that the Palladium of Troy was removed from Rome by Constantine and placed under his great porphyry column.
- Byzantines still claimed Roman legacy – Romaioi – in Arabic *Rûm*.

- The adjective *byzantinus* was developed in Renaissance period to distinguish this Empire.
- Byzantium – Eastern Roman Empire that was Hellenic in culture and language.
- When to classify the beginning of the Byzantine Empire – foundation (AD 324) or inauguration (AD 330) of Constantinople? Split of East and West (AD 395)? Fall of Western Roman Empire (AD 476)?
- Latin continues in use in some spheres down to the sixth century AD – e.g. Law (Theodosian and Justinianic Codes) – Latin script on coins – Roman offices and symbols.

East in the Face of Crisis

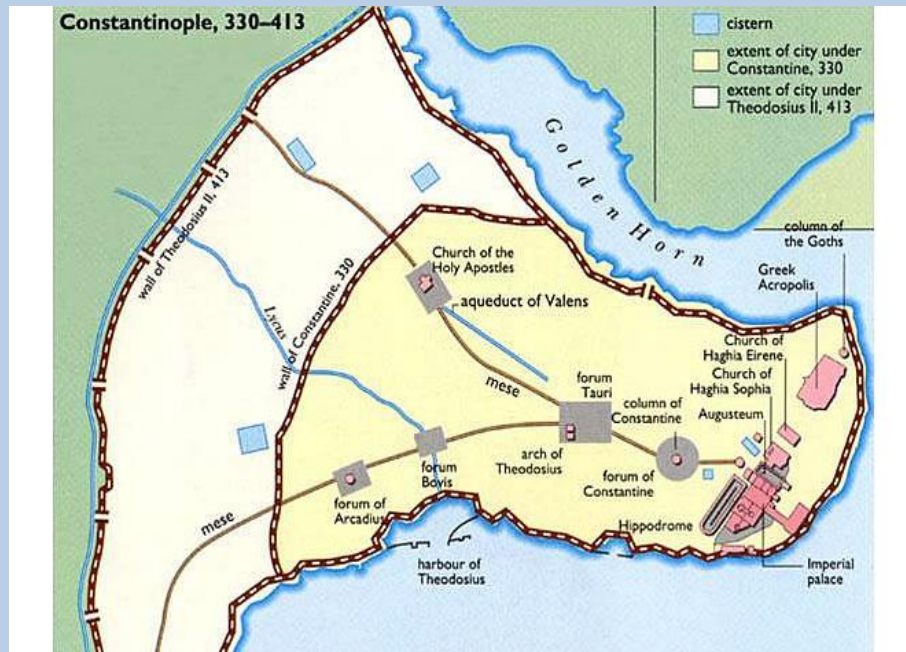
- Main threats the Balkan frontier and the Sassanid Persian Empire.
- Major barbarian threats often deflected westward.
- East more densely urbanised – greater economic prosperity – similar trends in fifth century of expansion of aristocratic states.
- Ostrogothic confederation settles in northern Balkans – Theodoric persuaded to march west and depose Odoacer.

Constantinople

- Theodosius I makes Constantinople his base (AD 380) – peripatetic phase of the imperial court ends.
- By end of the fourth century it is reported to have a population bigger than Antioch (c.200,000) – by reign of Justinian (AD 527-565) population estimated at 500,000.
- *Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae* (c. AD 425-430) – lists 14 churches, 52 colonnaded streets, 153 private bath complexes and several cisterns.
- Major phase of construction and aggrandisement ends after the reign of Justinian.

Theodosian Walls

- Erected during the reign of Theodosius II (AD 402-450) between 404-13.
- Also earlier wall of Constantine.
- Inner wall, outer wall and moat.
- Networks of aqueducts extending 200 km to the west, many cisterns – water supply venerable.



Religious Divisions

- Council summoned by Theodosius I in AD 381 – Bishop of Constantinople granted primacy over all other patriarchates, save for Rome.
- Tensions with Arians, a number of Goths massacred in a Church in AD 400.
- Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) – nature of Christ (Human and Divine) – Orthodox position vs. Syriac and Egyptian Churches.
- Eventual Schism between East and West.

East and West

- Despite fragmenting West – relations between the two still important.
- Marriage alliances – Theodosius II sends expedition to support the claim of Valentinian III – married to Theodosius' daughter Licinia Eudoxia.
- Expeditions to Africa – Leo sends 1,000 ships (AD 468) – joint effort with western government but ends in failure – cost of 130,000 lbs of gold.

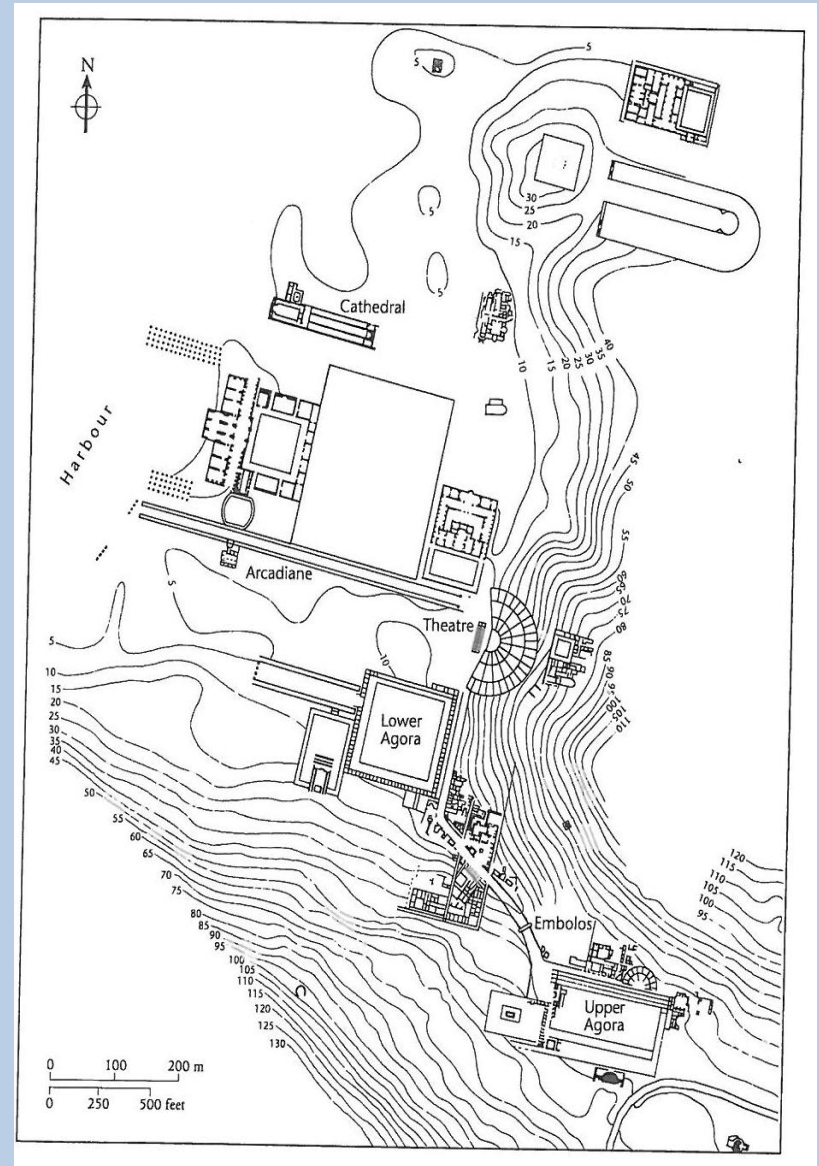
“And the Emperor Leo, wishing to punish the Vandals because of these things, was gathering an army against them; and they say that this army amounted to about one hundred thousand men... they say, thirteen hundred centenaria were expended by him to no purpose... he made Basiliscus commander-in-chief, the brother of his wife Berine... had not purposely played the coward and hesitated, but had undertaken to go straight for Carthage, he would have captured it at the first onset...” – **Procopius *Wars* 3.6.**

Byzantine Society

Urban Life

- Like the West – municipal burdens often shoulder on the weaker members of the local elite.
- Local towns cities started to be run more by governors, bishops and great landowners – benefaction skewed towards main centres.
- Public venues like theatres of hippodrome were venues where the public could express discontent.

- Many civic structures built during earlier empire, but still maintained.
- Church buildings and fortifications newer features.
- ***The Life of Symeon the Fool*** – mentions civic life in Ephesus – markets, theatre, baths, colonnaded streets, churches, mansions of rich and shacks of poor, shops, workshops and cook-shops.



Plan of Late Antique Ephesus

Rural Life

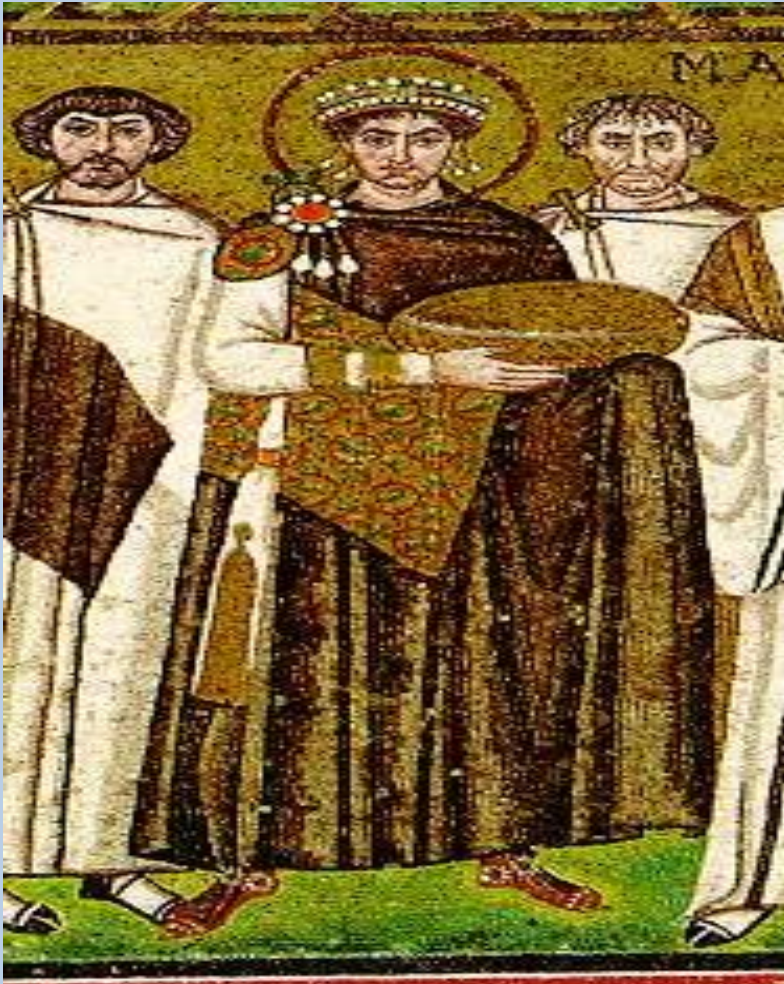
- Series of 700 well-preserved villages in Syria (about Orontes river).
- C. 20-50 houses built of stone in each village, usually two story – animals living on ground floor – lack of latrines, no separate kitchen areas.
- Among the 700 villages only 5 public baths.
- No structures identified as shops or bazaars.
- Churches, some rather grandiose.



Two story house – Serjilla.

Justinian AD 527-565

Mosaics of San Vitale – Ravenna (AD 547)



Justinian

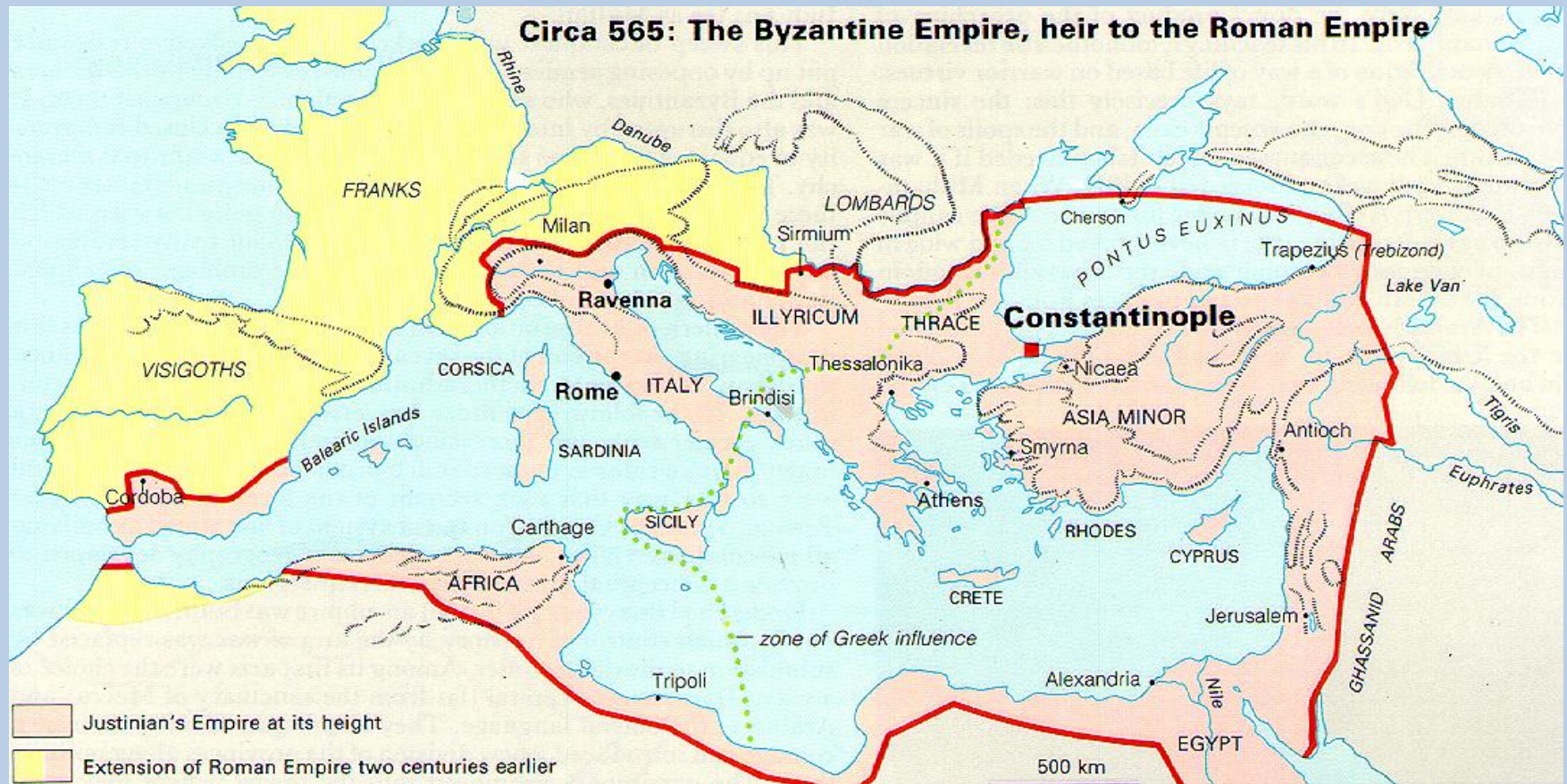


Theodora

Powers of Justinian

- Civil law was reformed and codified – Emperor established as the only legitimate source of law – *Institutes* (AD 533); *Digest* (533); *Codex Justinianus* (534).
- Attempts to reconcile pro and anti-Chalcedonian positions – resistant bishops punished and excluded – claims imperial authority to regulate priesthoods and the Church.

- In the AD 330s Justinian attacks the Vandals in North Africa (533-34) and the Ostrogoths in Italy (535-553).
- Avars establish themselves in the Pannonian plain.



Sassanid Attacks

- Major treaty between Byzantium and Persia concluded in AD 533 – former paid 11,000 lb of gold for peace.
- Khurso I sack Antioch in AD 540.
- AD 561 “fifth-year peace” concluded.

“I shudder when I describe so great a disaster, and pass it on to be remembered for future generations, and I know what God’s will could be in raising up the affairs of a man or a place, and then casting them down and whipping them out for no apparent reason.” –
Procopius *History of the Wars* 2.10.4.

Nika Riots – AD 532

- Large public venues, especially the hippodrome, the arena in which emperor and people may communicate with each other.
- Prior to seventh century inaugurations may take place in hippodrome – e.g. Emperor Leo (AD 457-74).
- Justinian addresses the people from the Imperial box during the Nika revolt, swore an oath on Gospels in front of them – some chanted “Augustus Justinian, you are victorious”, other chanted “You are foresworn, ass.” – *Chronicon Paschale*.



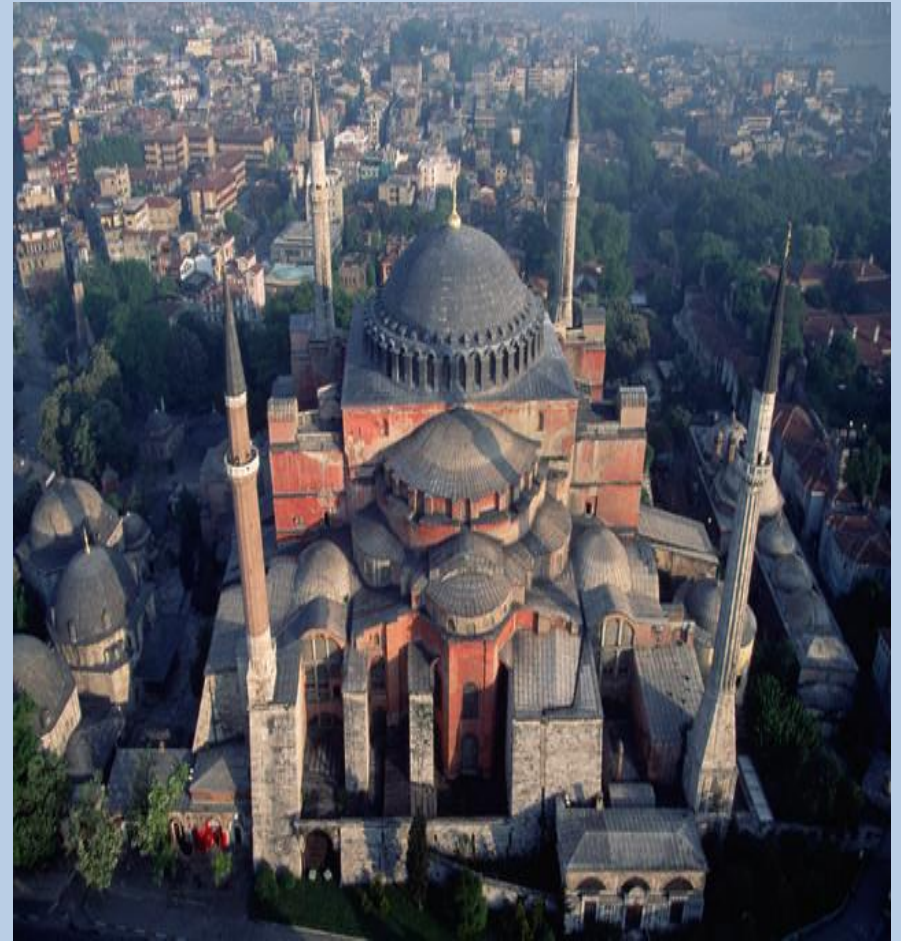
Base of obelisk of Theodosius II – in the Hippodrome.

“Now the emperor and his court were deliberating as to whether it would be better for them if they remained or if they took to flight in the ships... When the queen [Theodora] had spoken thus, all were filled with boldness, and, turning their thoughts towards resistance... Concluding, therefore, that he must go against the populace who had taken their stand in the hippodrome a vast multitude crowding each other in great disorder he drew his sword from its sheath and, commanding the others to do likewise... there perished among the populace on that day more than thirty thousand.” – **Procopius *History of the Wars* 1.24.32 ff.**

Hagia Sophia

- Replaces earlier building destroyed in the Nika riots.
- Dedicated AD 535, dome replaced in 563 after original collapsed.

“Both its breadth and its length have been so carefully proportioned, that it may not improperly be said to be exceedingly long and at the same time unusually broad... The whole ceiling is overlaid with pure gold... who could recount the beauty of the columns and the stones with which the church is adorned?” – **Procopius *Buildings* 1.28, 54, 59.**



Church of Holy Wisdom

Bubonic Plague – AD 540s

- Population of the Byzantine Empire may have been reduced by a third?

“During these times there was a pestilence... which the whole human race came near to being annihilated... with some the body broke out with black pustules about as large as a lentil and these did not survive even one day, but all succumbed immediately. With many also a vomiting of blood ensued without visible cause and straightway brought death... Now the disease in Byzantium ran a course of four months... and afterwards the tale of dead reached five thousand each day, and again it even came to ten thousand and still more than that. – **Procopius *History of the Wars* 2.22-23.**

“I too, the writer of this history... was afflicted in the early stages of the plague with the so-called buboes, while I was still just a schoolboy. In various attacks of the plague many of my children died, as well as my wife and other members of the my family... for the attack returned up to my own day, as it were in cyclic progression... the plague having returned four times to Antioch and this being the fourth attack in the cycle.” – **Evagrius *Ecclesiastical History* 4.29.**

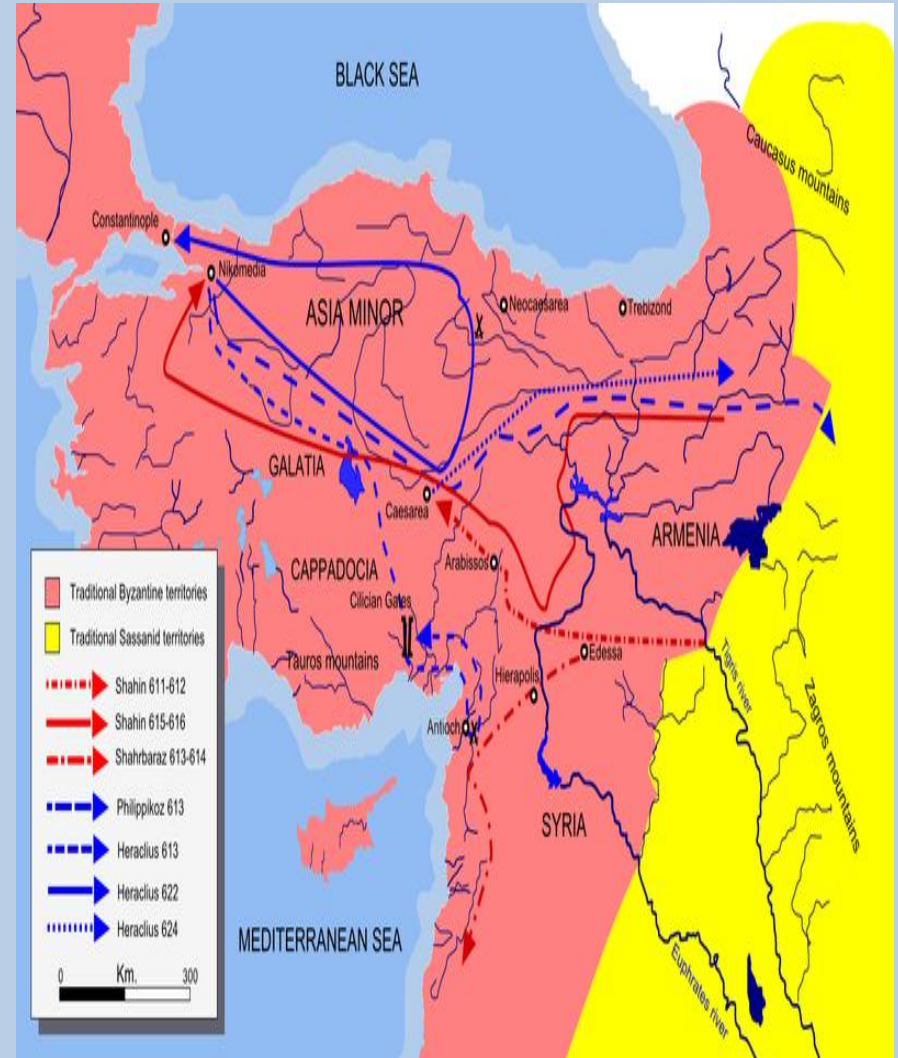
Justinian's Legacy

- Failed to curb the power of landowning elite and tax evasion.
- Exhausted treasury – plague, military expansion, building projects – munity on eastern frontier in AD 588 after pay reduced 25%
- Slavs entre Balkans, Lombards northern Italy as result of Avar pressure.
- Phokas – civil war in early seventh century.

Byzantium on the Retreat

Byzantine-Sassanid War AD 602-628

- AD 609-11 – Persian under Khurso II campaign in Syria and into Anatolia.
- Heraclius suffers major defeat near Antioch (613).
- Persian capture Damascus and Jerusalem (613-14).
- Roman attempts to sue for peace rebuffed (615).
- Alexandria lost (619) – Ancyra, Rhodes and other island seized (623).

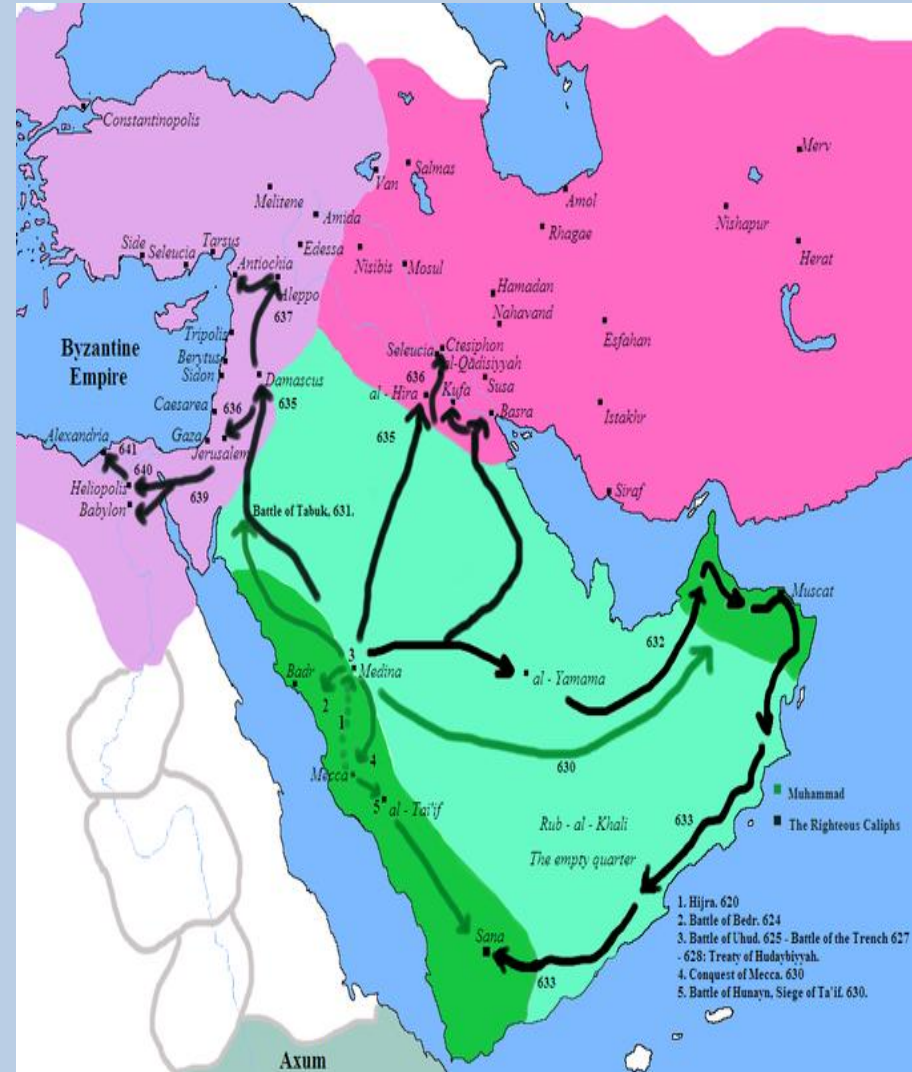


Fighting Back

- Crisis measures instituted by Heraclius (AD 615-622) – state salaries and military pay halved – churches stripped of gold and silver – plays upon apocalyptic sensibilities.
- Army units trained in “guerrilla warfare”, backed by notion of Christian holy war.
- Heraclius marches into Persian Armenia (AD 624) and then south into Atropatene (north Iran / Azerbaijan) – destroys Zoroastrian fire temple at Takht-i-Sulaiman.
- Help requested from the Christian lords of the Caucuses.
- Persian army preparing for an assault on Constantinople with aid of Avars (AD 625) – Heraclius harries advancing forces.
- Alliance with the Turks (AD 627) – Heraclius defeats Persian army at the Nineveh – cities to north of Ctesiphon ravaged.
- Death of Khurso II AD 628 – civil strife in Persian court – peace treaty restoring previous Roman-Persian frontier – True Cross restored to Jerusalem.

Rise of Islam

- Muhammad claims revelations from God – c. 610s.
- By AD 620s Muhammad unites much of Arabia under his leadership.
- Muhammad dies around AD 632 – his successors go on to conquer Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Persia in seventh century.



Bibliography

- Mango, C. A. (ed.), (2002) *The Oxford History of Byzantium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.