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The Greek Caesars: Byzantium and the Roman Tradition

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Abstract

The West considers itself the inheritor of Roman civilization. This shapes our self-perceptions and is reflected in our culture. This inheritance is, however, indirect. No Western nation directly traces its origins to Rome. Under scrutiny, the West only begins after 476. An oft-overlooked foil for this indirect inheritance is Byzantium. Eastern Rome maintained the line of Caesars into the early Renaissance. This paper argues that Byzantium enjoyed a direct inheritance of the Roman tradition that has been willingly overlooked by Westerners due to a biased understanding of Rome's cultural and political legacy. I hope to nuance the West's relationship with Rome and transform *romanitas* from a static ideal into a dynamic identity. How Europeans saw Antiquity was shaped by circumstance. The West fell amidst varied barbarian groups who merged Roman and Germanic political concepts to form early Medieval princedoms. The Byzantine East saw the maintenance of Roman state power, but followed a grecophone, Christian identity that grew to exclude Rome's pagan, Latin-speaking past. These experiences determined how each saw Rome; to the West, Rome was an asymptotic glory, where, in the East, it was a present, if diminished, reality. Analyzing Roman memory allows us to reconcile inconsistencies in Western self-perceptions and understand the role of identity in the formation of Medieval Europe. Proper contextualization vindicates Byzantium as the last

holdout of Antiquity and casts romanitas as a dynamic identity whose fragments stretch well into modernity.

Keywords: *Rome, Byzantium, Greece, Late Antiquity, Christianization, Identity*

Rome is as much an idea as it was a society. It was the empire that birthed Europe. We commune with its spirit in art, law, and language. Its name conjures images of marble statues, vibrant mosaics, and sprawling forums. Ever since its fall, its memory has been invoked by rulers and thinkers alike. Charlemagne would be crowned Emperor of the Romans, despite presiding over Franks. Renaissance scholars would look to the humanism of Cicero, where Enlightenment philosophers would laude Cato's staunch republicanism. This idea of Rome, however, does not match its historical reality. Rome is seen as an ideal society that came to a definite end. This empire's dusk was swift, clear, and immediate. Rome was gone, and up rose the dim Medieval age. History contradicts this view. The real Rome fell gradually and incompletely. Indeed, that its "fall" can even be described as such is a matter of scholarly contention. Its Western half would transform into the Medieval West, where its Eastern half would live on in Byzantium.

Byzantium is central, therefore, to understanding Rome's legacy. Rome survived until 1453, with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, not 476, as is traditionally described. Classical civilization did not die with Antiquity, but instead clung to the Aegean's rocky shores until the Renaissance. Rome cannot be an ideal past for the West if these Medieval Romans coexisted with and, during the crusades, warred against it. If the West were to accept

Byzantium as Roman, its self-perceptions would collapse. Because of this, Byzantium has been consigned to historic limbo. Its name reflects this. The Byzantines only ever called themselves *Rhomaioi*, Romans, their empire the *Basileia Rhomaion*, the Roman Empire, and even their Greek tongue *Rhomaikos*, the Roman language. The name ‘Byzantium’ is an exonym coined by Hieronymus Wolf, a 16th century German historian.¹ It is the Latinization of *Βυζαντιον*, the Greek colony upon which Constantinople was founded: a Greek base pressed through a Latin filter. The name, then, like the state it describes, is composed of both Greece and Rome while belonging wholly to neither.

I argue that Byzantium was a fundamentally Roman civilization whose ancestry has been obfuscated by Hellenism and Christianity. These elements have been able to do so due to a biased Western understanding of Rome that emphasizes early Roman culture—namely Latin, paganism, and Italy proper. Some of this bias has been intentional. But most results from historical periodization; Byzantium appears more Medieval than Ancient, so we assume it to be Medieval and not Ancient. Studying Byzantine culture, however, reveals that it was the natural outgrowth of Late Antique Roman society. Byzantium is thereby pulled from limbo and seated squarely within the Roman tradition. This has a cascade of implications for the West. Our idea of Rome loses credibility, and Roman civilization is demystified.

Byzantine Hellenism: Greeks, Romans, or Greek Romans?

Our first summit to hurdle is Byzantine Hellenism. Byzantium is typically called Greek rather than Roman. This appears well-substantiated. The modern Greek nation, looking to a

¹ George Ostrogorsky, “History of the Byzantine State” (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 2.

time before Turkish colonization, claims Byzantium for themselves.² Byzantine specialists characterize the empire as dominated by “Greek culture.”³ The Byzantines spoke a language we now call Medieval Greek. Indeed, this Greek Byzantium paints a much neater picture than a Roman one. We do not need to reconcile their abandonment of Latin with a Roman past. We do not need to reconcile their Eastern location and culture with an Italian origin. All we must do is take their self-professed Roman identity to *really* mean Greek.⁴

This, however, poses glaring issues. First, that of academic chauvinism: to accept ‘Greek Byzantium’ we must assume that we know better who the Byzantines were than they did themselves. This is dishonest academic procedure: in doing so, we project our modern, foreign perspective onto a long-gone people. Second, it presumes a complete break with their Roman past. A Greek Byzantium becomes a rump state. With the death of the Roman West, the Byzantine Empire ruled only the Hellenic world. In this view, Hellenism—Greek language and culture—was no longer smothered by a Latin metropole and could again flourish. Rome, therefore, definitively died in 476; Byzantine history is that of a liberated Greece. The Franks had such a narrative in mind when calling Byzantium the “Kingdom of the Greeks” instead of the “Roman Empire.”⁵ Having predated modern Greece by a millennia, Charlemagne was not tying Byzantium to any national narrative. He instead denied Byzantine *imperium* (and therefore legal Roman succession) by calling it a kingdom, and painted Byzantine culture as a Greek atavism. Rome, to the Franks, was dead, and its legacy was up for grabs. Byzantium had

² Anthony Kaldellis, “Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium” (London, England: Belknap Press, 2019), 15.

³ Ostrogorsky, “History of the Byzantine State,” 27.

⁴ Kaldellis, “Romanland,” 17.

⁵ Kaldellis, “Romanland,” 17.

to be Greek for this to be true. Greek Byzantium and Roman Byzantium, then, appear mutually exclusive.

This Greek-Roman dichotomy is dispelled when looking to history. The assumptions necessary for the 'Greek' and 'Roman' traditions to be mutually exclusive are wholly of modern invention. Byzantium would inherit a heavily Hellenized Roman East, but a Roman one nonetheless. To modern eyes, this is the muddling of two separate nations. We view Greek culture as the exclusive inheritance of that nation, and Roman culture as the exclusive inheritance of theirs. The Greek tradition is, to us, Greek-speaking and centered in Greece. The Roman tradition is, to us, Latin-speaking and centered in Italy. Ancient people operated with no such understanding. Roman and Greek culture were synonymous by Late Antiquity. Rome saw itself as the eternal empire destined to rule over a united Mediterranean forever. In such an environment, modern understandings of identity and nationhood retain little coherence.

"To the Romans," spoke Jupiter, "I assign no limit of things nor of time. To them I have given empire without end."⁶ Rome was eternal. It did not have a *telos*: it was a *telos*. All of the chaos of the early Mediterranean—the wars between Persia and Athens, between Athens and Sparta, and between Rome and Carthage—found its historic end in the united, firm leadership of the Caesars. Rome, the favorite of Olympus, was destined to rule forever. This idea should frame how we think of Roman Hellenism. If we see a sublimated Greek identity in that of Eastern Rome, we do so only because we anticipate its later, fuller expression in modernity. The Romans anticipated no such change. They were epistemologically limited: there was no

⁶ Virgil, Robert Fagles, and Bernard Knox. "The Aeneid" (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 1.278.

civilization so large and enduring as Rome in the past, so they could only assume that they had reached the final epoch of human history. The British empire co-existed with those of the French and Dutch. Such pluralism would be foreign to Rome. The only other state they came close to recognizing as legitimate was Persia, and, even then, only after centuries of stalemate.⁷ Roman history was the history of human civilization: there existed only Romans and Barbarians. Grecophone Romans belonged to the former.

This incorporation was possible for pragmatic and sentimental reasons. First, the pragmatic: Latin could never unseat Greek as the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean. The metropolises of the East had been grecophone for centuries.⁸ *Romanitas* would bend sooner than would the linguistic inertia of millions—that is, Rome would absorb Greek language into its culture before the entire East would eschew its native tongue.

Sentimentally, however, Hellenism was central to Roman culture. *Romanitas*, therefore, would not need to bend much to absorb the Greek language. To Rome, Hellenism was not synonymous with a Hellenic ethnicity.^{9 10} It was instead a collection of practices, stories, idioms, and ideas. It gave Rome a rich intellectual and artistic tradition and a historical continuum through which it could understand itself. Roman aristocrats would be given a Hellenic education, Roman pagans would worship a Hellenized pantheon, and Roman craftsmen would imitate Hellenic styles. The Greek language was but one of many Greek cultural influences. Only

⁷ Danuta Shanzer, “Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity,” ed. Ralph W. Mathisen (London, England: Routledge, 2016), 65.

⁸ Peter Brown, “The World of Late Antiquity” (London, England: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 16.

⁹ Anthony Kaldellis, “Greek Culture in the Roman World: Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition” (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17.

¹⁰ Gruen, Erich S, “Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome.” (Cornell University Press, 1992), 236.

in such a syncretist context could emperor Claudius describe Greek and Latin as the “two languages of [the Roman] people.”¹¹

Romans saw continuity between themselves and Greece. After his victory at Actium, Augustus would visit Alexander’s tomb and place a gold diadem atop the Macedonian’s head.¹² The master of the Roman world deferred to the Greek master of the known one. This act of supposed humility invited comparison between the two hero-kings. Augustus’s sculptures and coins would be later modeled off of those of Alexander: both were depicted as idealized Hellenic youths.¹³ Cicero would say of the Athenian Demosthenes, *inter omnis unus excellat*: “he alone stands among all the orators.”¹⁴ Latin and Greek oratory constituted, to Cicero, the same tradition. He would invoke Demosthenes’s memory when titling his Philippics condemning Mark Antony.¹⁵ The Romans used Homeric poetry to explain their own origins, claiming descent from Aeneas of Troy. In this, they relied upon Greek culture to understand who they were. Some, like Cato the Elder, decried Greek influence. Yet Cato himself boasted flawless Attic prose and an intimate understanding of Greek literature. Romans interacted with Greek culture as though it was their own. Separate Greek and Roman traditions are therefore difficult to construct, even in the nascence of their relationship.

¹¹ Suetonius, Robert Graves, and Michael Grant. “The Twelve Caesars.” (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), Life of Claudius, 42.

¹² Suetonius, “The Twelve Caesars,” Divus Augustus, 18.

¹³ Marlowe, Jean Field. “Alexander Imagery in the Augustan Age.” M.A., University of Louisville. Accessed April 14, 2022.

¹⁴ Quintilian and H.E. Butler, “The Institutio Oratoria, Books VII-IX.” (Harvard University Press, Year: 1959), Book X, 1.76.

¹⁵ Cicero, Marcus Tullius, Titus Pomponius Atticus, D. R. Shackleton Bailey, and Marcus Tullius Cicero. “Cicero's Letters to Atticus.” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965-1971), 2.1.3.

While Rome would adopt Greek culture, Greece would adopt Roman identity. Over centuries, *Hellenes* would begin to identify as *Rhomaioi*.¹⁶ *Romanitas* was always non-ethnic, being “predicated from an early date on the notion of ethnic heterogeneity between Latin, Sabine and Etruscan populations.”¹⁷ This facilitated the gradual rise of Roman identity among Greek-speakers. By Late Antiquity, Roman identity was ubiquitous in both Greece and the empire at large.¹⁸ The Mediterranean may have been cleaved into a Latinophone West and Grecophone East, but *romanitas* flowed equally from its shores.¹⁹ While Latin enjoyed prestige as Rome’s historic tongue, this would not preclude Byzantium from calling its language *rhomaikos*, or the Roman language.²⁰ Greeks, or *Hellenes*, were thought as a long-gone people confined wholly to history.²¹ They were similar, in the Roman mind, to the Samnites or Etruscans: an ancient *genos* that Rome once warred against, but eventually absorbed. The use of their language, something Romans had been educated in since the middle Republic, did not therefore carry ethnic particularism. Greek language and culture had outlived Greek identity.

This may be hard for modern scholars to accept. Identity is, to us, intimately tied to language. Wars are fought between ethno-linguistic groups. Anticolonialism often entailed a rejection of the colonizers’ tongue. Gaelic, for example, was taken up by Irish nationalists seeking to upend the legacy of English rule. Linguists would work furiously to establish

¹⁶ Kaldellis, “Hellenism in Byzantium,” 117.

¹⁷ Kaldellis, “Hellenism in Byzantium,” 87.

¹⁸ Kaldellis, “Romanland,” 84.

¹⁹ Brown, “The World of Late Antiquity,” 14. This is true in a literal sense; one was better inculturated into Roman society the closer they were to the urbanized coast. “Roman,” then, if stratified at all geographically, was done so by proximity to the Mediterranean, not to its Eastern or Western halves.

²⁰ Kaldellis, “Hellenism in Byzantium,” 73.

²¹ Kaldellis, “Romanland,” 71, 114.

connections between language families to justify political aims. This is why Turkish nationalists would tie the Turkic languages to a controversial pan-Eurasian “Altaic” family.²² With these modern assumptions, it is easy to see a muffled Greece in Eastern Rome. This is only bolstered by Byzantine territory being relegated to the Greek East. It looks like an independent Greece, spoke the language of an independent Greece, and is claimed by our modern independent Greece.

It is, however, not an independent Greece. Identity is tied to circumstance. Modern appeals to language are powerful because modern political thought makes them so. We care about national self-determination, and language is a simple way of determining who belongs to which nation. It therefore is, to us, political. As mentioned before, Greek Romans saw themselves as legitimately incorporated into Roman civilization for eternity. Greek Romans were not, like the Israelites in Egypt, waiting for their day to be free of the Latin yoke. It would make sense for the Israelites to maintain their identity due to their subordinate position. Greeks had instead become Romans, and thereby had no need to envision a future independent of the West. Even the distinctions that populate this paper— “Greek Roman,” “Roman Greek,” etc.—would have been foreign to their ears. Roman citizens were either *Romani* or *Rhomaioi*, plain and simple.

Byzantium was a polity, then, composed of grecophone Romans. They did not anticipate a future independent Greece. If they did, they would have shed their Roman titles and history

²² Aytürk, İlker. “Turkish Linguists against the West: The Origins of Linguistic Nationalism in Atatürk’s Turkey.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 6 (November 2004): 5.

with the death of the West. The fact that these Greek-speakers could earnestly be Roman, however, speaks to a transformation in the Roman Empire at large. The death of Greek identity would become more complete as independent *Hellas* receded further into the fog of history. The Rome Byzantium inherited was a Rome that had presided over a unified Mediterranean for as long as anyone could remember. This was not the Rome of the Julio-Claudians. That Rome was an Italian empire, hierarchically composed of Italy and her possessions. Late Rome was, instead, *Romania*: a horizontal “Land of the Romans.”²³ ²⁴ This Roman world admitted of little internal division.²⁵ Greek Romans were, then, wholly Roman. Their Byzantine descendants should not be seen as anything else.

Medieval Byzantium: A Christian Empire

The next obstacle to Byzantine *romanitas* is Christianity. Christianization is not in and of itself antithetical to the Roman tradition: Rome was, after all, the fountainhead of European Christendom. The issue is *how* Christianization manifested in Byzantium. That is, the institutions and philosophy of Christian Byzantium make it appear wholly consigned to the unenlightened Medieval Age. Edward Gibbon captures this relationship in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. For him, Christianity precipitated Rome’s moral and political decline. It weakened its armies, sterilized its intellect, and emasculated its leaders. Pagan Rome and Christian Byzantium were two opposite nodes on a tale of uniform deterioration. Though the, in his words, “Greek Caesars,” were tacitly Roman, by the time of the crusades they had degenerated

²³ Kaldellis, “Romanland,” 80.

²⁴ Kaldellis, “Romanland,” 84.

²⁵ Kaldellis, “Romanland,” 84.

into an unrecognizable form.²⁶ This reflects popular sentiment. Rome is a land of civil service and humanism, boasting an impressive cadre of poets, philosophers, and historians. Byzantium, meanwhile, in the words of one Irish historian, is the “monotonous story of the intrigues of priests [and] eunuchs ... of poisonings, of conspiracies, of uniform ingratitude.”²⁷ This dichotomy extends even to coinage. Roman denarii feature humanistic side profiles, where Byzantine solidae are simple, front-facing, and stylized—like icons.²⁸ One is left believing that these Byzantines looked upon the temporal with removed embitterment; this world was for them but a necessary pain before passage into Christ’s eternal kingdom. Proper historical context, however, reveals that Christianity merged seamlessly with Roman ideology. If anything, the Christian Byzantines felt themselves closer to Rome’s destiny than were their pagan forefathers. This was not a civilizational rupture: the traditions of the Tiber and Bosphorus were, instead, two acts of the same story. Byzantium maintained a classical culture informed by Christianization.

As mentioned before, Roman ideology saw their empire as a permanent fact of human history. Rome was *the* empire, destined to rule over *its* sea forever. Christianity fit neatly into this worldview. If Rome was the one true empire, then who else should enact the one true will of the one true God? Jesus’s birth in Roman Judea proved, to the Romans, that their empire was central to God’s plan. The Roman state provided safe passage for early proselytizers and the Greek language’s ubiquity allowed the gospel to take root in the East. The birth of Christ

²⁶ Edward Gibbon and David Womersley, “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” (London, England: Penguin Classics, 1996), LIII IV.

²⁷ William Lecky, A history of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne 2 vols. (London 1869), 13.

²⁸ Compare the youthful denarius of Augustus in fig. 1 to the solidus depicting Heraclius and his son in fig. 2.

even coincided with the birth of the Roman monarchy under Augustus.²⁹ Rome's Christianization, then, entailed the sons of Aeneas realizing they were also the sons of Abraham. Christ's ministry, far from being Rome's antithesis, gave Roman history a new meaning. It was the climax that all hitherto existing civilization had built up to, and around which all following life would be shaped. History was to begin on the Tiber and end with the Second Coming. Such was the will of God.

Medieval Rome, then, saw itself as having privilege over the Rome of Antiquity. It knew the divine story in which Rome was implicated. This story had a clear end: the Second Coming. Rome was to protect, not only legitimate civilization, but legitimate faith until then. If it was the emperor's duty to, in the words of a Komnenian court historian, "preserve the ancient customs of the state,"³⁰ this was because the state was the wax that linked Genesis to the Last Judgment. The Romans had always been staunch traditionalists; the *mos maiorum*, or "way of the ancestors," was the standard against which present Roman society was eternally judged.³¹ Christianity, however, charged Roman conservatism with purpose: Rome was to be maintained until Jesus's return.

Christian Rome would henceforth no longer produce such ardent rationalists as Cicero. This appears to lend credibility to Gibbon's criticisms. We must caution ourselves, however, against presuming that pagan enlightenment was pre-Christian Rome's status quo. Pagan Rome may have produced these sages of Antiquity, but it also put them to miserable ends: Cicero was

²⁹ Cyril Mango, "The Oxford History of Byzantium" (London, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33.

³⁰ Mango, "The Oxford History of Byzantium," 54.

³¹ Karl-J Hölkesskamp and Henry Heitmann-Gordon, "Reconstructing the Roman Republic: An Ancient Political Culture and Modern Research" (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 18.

assassinated in the courtyard of his own home,³² and Cato ripped out his own organs to frustrate Caesar's political machinations.³³ Virgil's Aeneid, the apex of Latin prose, was intended as a propaganda piece for the Julio-Claudians.³⁴ Rome was a land of great cultural achievement, but not uniformly so. Similarly, Byzantium did not have a dormant intellect. Its theologians and philosophers would be active until the empire's death. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the flight of Byzantine court scholars to Western Europe would charge the early Renaissance with Greek manuscripts and learning. Byzantium produced intellectuals such as Procopius, Michael Psellos, and Anna Komnene. It would, too, boast a rich secular literary tradition.³⁵ Stereotype should not, therefore, infiltrate our understandings of Roman and Byzantine thought.

The ramifications of Christianization would not only be spiritual: Christianity would make Rome increasingly Eastern. Italy and Latin may have given the world Rome, but Christianity was born in Judea and articulated in Greek. Old hallmarks of Roman civilization would lose prestige relative to new ones amidst the maturation of this religious orientation.

The rise of Constantinople exemplifies Christianity's cultural fallout. *Nova Roma* would begin as Edler Rome's junior. To equate Roman prestige, Constantine stripped other cities of ancient monuments and shipped them East.³⁶ He would embark on building projects that

³² Plutarch, and Bernadotte Perrin. "Plutarch's Lives." (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967), 207.

³³ Plutarch, "Plutarch's Lives," 269.

³⁴ Evans, Jane DeRose, "The Art of Persuasion: Political Propaganda from Aeneas to Brutus" (University of Michigan Press, 1992.), 6.

³⁵ Carolina Cupane and Bettina Krönung, "Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond," (Brill, 2016), 3.

³⁶ Lucy Grig and Gavin Kelly, "Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity," (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 57.

clumsily mirrored those of Rome: If Rome had an ornate column (that of Marcus Aurelius), Constantinople was to have an ornate column (that of, unsurprisingly, Constantine).³⁷ If Rome had a massive Colosseum, Constantinople was to have a massive Hippodrome.³⁸ Traditionalists saw Constantinople as a renegade upstart that undermined the established pecking order of Mediterranean cities.³⁹ The emperor's efforts were not, therefore, well-received: how could one replace Rome in a *Roman* Empire?

Christianization provided an answer to that question: Constantine's successors would make New Rome fit for a Christian emperor. Saint's relics would be imported from around the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ Churches and basilicas would be constructed *en masse*. Constantinople would adopt the Virgin Mary as its patron saint to counter Rome's St. Peter.⁴¹ This capital would not, then, merely ape its elder. Rome may have been Jupiter's favorite, but Constantinople was to be God's.

Less than two centuries after its founding, Constantinople eclipsed Rome in prestige.⁴² This signified a tectonic cultural shift. To the Medieval Romans of Greece and Anatolia, a distant pagan past in Latium was irrelevant to the lives they lived and breathed. Ancient history was the concern of court intellectuals. Rome, meanwhile, was wherever Romans lived. Romans of Late Antiquity were grecophone Christians who lived in the East. The Greek language, Christian religion, and Eastern Mediterranean were central to Roman civilization *ipso facto*. New Rome

³⁷ Grig and Kelly, "Two Romes," 58.

³⁸ Grig and Kelly, "Two Romes," 57.

³⁹ Grig and Kelly, "Two Romes," 50.

⁴⁰ Grig and Kelly, "Two Romes," 61.

⁴¹ Grig and Kelly, "Two Romes," 62.

⁴² Grig and Kelly, "Two Romes," 77.

would surpass Elder Rome because it better reflected Late Antique politics and culture. By the reign of Justinian, the East was steering the ship of Roman life and thought. The Hagia Sophia's completion was, in the eyes of orator Paul the Silentiary, the moment of this eclipse: "[Justinian, by] raising this infinite temple ... has made you [Constantinople] more brilliant than your mother on the Tiber who bore you."⁴³ According to legend, its gold dome was hoisted up and held aloft by a chain from the sky.⁴⁴ New Rome was thereby literally tied to heaven. The divine washed over this city like a flood issuing from the clouds. Constantinople was a new, Christian Rome for a new, Christian Empire.

Rome's Christianization, then, is best understood as bringing new life to imperial culture. It merged seamlessly with the *romanitas* of yesteryear, but steered it eastwards. Justinian would not see himself at odds with Augustus. He would, however, see himself as living in a more privileged age. This is comparable to how we might see Medieval Europeans in the modern day. When we read of plague doctors prescribing bloodletting, we cannot help but pity their patients' suffering as the futile product of ignorance: the doctors, simply put, did not know better. Christian Emperors would look upon their predecessors in much the same way. Justinian would not blame Augustus for engaging in ritual sacrifice, as he lived in a time before the ubiquity of the gospel. When presiding over the first mass of the Hagia Sophia, arms outstretched, Justinian unknowingly welcomed a new epoch of Roman history. The deep, Greek hymns that echoed through his massive church would continue to do so for the next thousand

⁴³ Grig and Kelly, "Two Romes," 77.

⁴⁴ Procopius, W. Lethabv, and H. Swainson, "De Aedificiis, in The Church of St. Sophia in Constantinople," (New York: 1894), 28.

years. Bilingual, Justinian would be both the last Latin Caesar and the first Greek one. This was not, per traditional analysis, the reign of the “last of the Romans.” This was, instead, the beginning of the second act of the Roman story. Christian Rome may have looked to the heavens for guidance, but it did so with its feet planted firmly in the East.

Two Romes, Two Memories: Rome and Byzantium in the Western Mind

Hellenism and Christianity, far from steering Rome into an unrecognizable form, were natural outgrowths of the Roman tradition. Why, then, do they obfuscate Byzantium’s legacy? The answer lies in the legacies of Rome and Byzantium understood by the West. The West has always seen Rome as both an ideal and an ancestor. It would be lauded for power, humanism, and enlightenment, and leave to posterity Latin and the Catholic Church. It became a standard against which Westerners could contrast their present world. Through this, however, its memory diverged from its historic reality: it was seen as more perfect than it was. Byzantium’s memory would be subject to opposite misappropriation. Remembered primarily through the autocratic Orthodox East, it epitomized every cause and effect of Rome’s decline in the mind of the West. Both of these memories are ahistorical. But they provide the context in which ‘Greek’ and ‘Christian’ can condemn Byzantium to historic limbo: the empire is thought of as a deviant strain of both.

The origins of the West’s idea of Rome can be seen not long after the Western Empire’s fall. In Late Antiquity, the distinction between ‘Roman’ and ‘Barbarian’ was blurred. To quote Peter Brown, “the Western Empire was not so much destroyed as eroded and finally rendered

unnecessary by a score of little Romes.”⁴⁵ These ‘little Romes’ were hyper-militarized polities led by warrior-kings.⁴⁶ There existed in them little distinction between government and tribe: indeed, barbarian ethnic identities are thought to have been constructed around these political groups.⁴⁷ Identity is socially, not biologically, constructed. Romans would begin to identify as Franks, Lombards, and Goths as a result of political allegiance and intermarriage. This was not like the Ottoman subjugation of Byzantium: in that environment, *Rhomaioi* could maintain their identity under clearly foreign rule. This was instead the piecemeal absorption of West Roman identity into a kaleidoscope of local Germanic ones. This syncretic foundation would predispose the West towards receptivity to the Roman memory. The Arabs, because of their Muslim faith, cared little for the heretical Romans they conquered. Germanic kings, meanwhile, would see continuity between themselves and Caesar.

‘Continuity’ would grow into ‘synonymy’ with the Carolingians. Charlemagne would be crowned *Imperator Romanorum*, or the Emperor of the Romans, and call his state the *Romanorum sive Francorum imperium*, or the empire of Romans and Franks.⁴⁸ He would make the *renovatio imperii Romanorum*, or restoration of the Roman empire, a matter of imperial policy.⁴⁹ Its Latin tongue would be revived. Classical literature would be transcribed. Denarii would be struck depicting *Carolus Magnus, Imp. Aug.* in a laurel wreath.⁵⁰ The Frankish Augusti

⁴⁵ Peter Brown, “The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.d. 200-1000, 10th ed.” (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), xxvii.

⁴⁶ Brown, “The Rise of Western Christendom,” 129.

⁴⁷ Shanzer, “Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World,” 34-35.

⁴⁸ Garipzanov, Ildar, “The Symbolic Language of Authority in the Carolingian World (c.751-877),” (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 21 Apr. 2008), 333.

⁴⁹ Garipzanov, “The Symbolic Language of Authority in the Carolingian World,” 87.

⁵⁰ See figure 3.

would engage in protracted diplomatic spats with the Greek Caesars surrounding the use and recognition of Roman titles.⁵¹ The idea of Rome understood by Charlemagne is emblematic of that of the West at large: an ancient ideal worthy of imitation.

This memory would become better articulated with time. The Medieval Era gave Rome's memory a Latin, Western core onto which the Renaissance and Enlightenment would project a pagan, humanist intellect. The nascent bourgeoisie of the Italian merchant republics would invoke its memory when commissioning secular art. Enlightenment scholars would study Rome's fall in search of lessons for their present societies. Gibbon's anticlerical reading of Roman history and Montesquieu's condemnation of "effeminate" Byzantium would spawn from this rationalist impulse. Rome's memory developed alongside Western thought: if the West liked humanism, Rome became humanist. If the West liked rationalism, Rome became rationalist. If the West disliked religion, Rome fell because of religion. The "Rome" that resulted from this process was Latin, enlightened, and directly ancestral.

Byzantium would become Rome's antithesis. It may have been Greek, Roman, and Christian—three traditions central to Europe's birth—but their precise combination in Byzantium produced "the most despicable and thoroughly base form that civilization has yet assumed."⁵² It would be criticized by Enlightenment philosophers and misrepresented by Western historians. Its Orthodox descendants would, similarly, eternally consign it to foreignness.

⁵¹ Kaldellis, "Hellenism in Byzantium," 112.

⁵² Lecky, "A History of European Morals," 13.

Byzantium and the Orthodox faith exist parallel to the West. They both somehow “diverged [from the] main avenue of European progress.”⁵³ Orthodox Christianity would begin in indistinguishable communion with the Western churches, just as the early Byzantine empire would command suzerainty over the whole of Europe. Orthodoxy would become, however, a regional tradition, just as its parent Byzantium would become a regional power. Orthodoxy is the liturgy closest to that of the patristic age, rejecting the developments common to the Western churches.⁵⁴ The Byzantine state was, similarly, frozen in a form from Antiquity. The Catholic and Protestant traditions have converted millions globally, while Orthodoxy is relegated to a bend stretching from the Peloponnese to Moscow.⁵⁵ Rome’s memory inspires the whole free world, while Byzantium’s foremost heir is Russia. Byzantium’s name sooner brings to mind the gloomy hymns of Greek choirs, the thick smoke of Eastern incense, and the uncomfortable alterity of Slavic Europe than the universal glory of Rome.

This idea of Byzantium—a strange, unenlightened Eastern backwater—fit poorly within the continuum of Roman history imagined by the West. The Tiber and Bosphorus were thereby consigned to eternal opposition. Rome became an empire of marble: pan-European glory, humanist art, and enlightened governance. Byzantium, meanwhile, became an empire of silk: morbid spirituality, deference to royalty, and oriental opulence. These memories, however, exist only in the minds of intellectuals. Byzantium remained, simply and earnestly, Roman. The

⁵³ Mango, “The Oxford History of Byzantium,” 42.

⁵⁴ Mango, “The Oxford History of Byzantium,” 65.

⁵⁵ “Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (December 19, 2011), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

fact that such opposite ideas could be derived from two phases of the same civilization speaks to history's capacity to be misremembered by parties with vested interests. The West's memory of Rome was the simple product of its historical experience. Rome, as an idea, developed in tandem with Western civilization. The West does not, therefore, have a purer understanding of Rome than did Byzantium. Far from being in a position to deny Byzantium's Roman legacy, it cannot justify its own claimed links to Antiquity.

A Demystified Rome: Conclusion

We have seen, then, throughout Rome's long history, its memory's subjugation to intellectual warping. Rome's legacy was first cleaved in two. These halves were then bent, stretched, and twisted to suit the needs of rulers and thinkers alike. Objections to Byzantine *romanitas* are products of these malformed ideas, but they nonetheless appear formidable. This is because history defines how we see the present. We can only build a vision for the future out of the past. Charlemagne would gravitate towards Rome's memory because Western Europe was littered with its ruins. He therefore sought to return song to crumbling amphitheaters, water to long-dry aqueducts, and glory to Western Europe. Likewise, Greek nationalists of the 19th century needed to tie themselves to a narrative both prestigious and their own. The West had monopolized Rome's memory, but ancient *Hellas* carried enough ethnic particularity to sustain a national narrative. They gravitated, then, towards *Hellene* over *Rhomaioi*, and thereby reframed the identity of every Greek-speaker throughout history. Identity presents itself as unchanging, but is wholly bound to circumstance. We see ourselves as the *telos* to which the past has led, and give the past meaning in relation to us. This, however,

leaves historic identities subordinate to present ones, exemplified by Byzantium's warped legacy.

Byzantium, however, only defined itself in relation to itself. It was neither a prelude to Eastern Tsardoms, nor the disgraced heir of a once-enlightened society. It was, simply, the long-suffering Roman Empire. Medieval Rome would see in the Latin Crusaders the ghost of the Goths that so crudely toppled Elder Rome. In the Muslim Turks they would see the ghost of Avar horsemen, and in the Avars the ghost of the Scythians catalogued by Herodotus. History was cyclical. Time was a closed continuum that began with Genesis and ended with the Apocalypse. Rome, similarly, dawned on the Tiber, reached its climax with Constantine, and ebbed and flowed until its dusk on the Bosphorus. The Byzantines were simply the Romans born at empire's sunset. One imagines them caring little for how their legacy would be understood. The Latins could spawn as many heresies as they like, and Arabia could follow a false prophet. Rome would instead remain the untarnished preserve of the primordial Orthodox faith.

The inward orientation of the Byzantine worldview recontextualizes their fall. To these last Romans, when the Ottomans breached the Theodosian walls in 1453, they poured the sin of *barbaricum* into Antiquity's final preserve. The folk-tales that surround Byzantium's death reflect this. At the moment of Turkish victory, the priests singing in the Hagia Sophia were supposedly absorbed into its mosaics in a blinding flash. The last emperor, Constantine XI, was transformed into marble by angels. Greek oral tradition maintains that he will emerge from the mountains to retake the old city. Eyewitnesses reported seeing a brilliant beam of light shoot

from the Hagia Sophia into the heavens. Old and tired Rome was unfit for this chaotic world of change. Its priests, faith, and emperor would only find serene stillness in heaven. The Romans could at last rest their weary eyes. Just as Elder Rome would be born and die under a Romulus, New Rome would be born and die under a Constantine. The empire's fate consummated; its silent, eternal dusk would begin.

In 1912, long after the deaths of Western and Eastern Rome, a Greek fleet would stop on the unassuming island of Lemnos. Peter Charanis, a Greek-American historian, describes a first-hand encounter with these Hellenic soldiers that illuminates Byzantium's proper legacy:

"When [my] island was occupied by the Greek navy, Greek soldiers were sent to the villages and stationed themselves in the public squares. Some of us children ran to see what these Greek soldiers, these Hellenes, looked like. 'What are you looking at?' one of them asked. 'At Hellenes,' we replied. 'Are you not Hellenes yourselves?' he retorted. 'No, we are Romans.'"⁵⁶

This was two years before the outbreak of World War One. Roman identity, then, was one of the longest-lasting in human history. These self-described Romans were not, however, toga-clad Senators who spoke impeccable Latin, but simple Aegean islanders. We read of the exploits of Caesar and the prose of Cicero and feel these men confined wholly to a glorious primordial past. But, they, and the plebs that did not make it into the history books, were normal people with a normal identity. This forgotten speck of Rome did not need military might, an unchanged culture, nor the approval of the West for its identity to be legitimate. It

⁵⁶ Kaldellis, "Hellenism in Byzantium," 42.

had simply maintained the identity of its ancestors. Byzantium, similarly, was completely Roman. Realizing this demystifies what it means to be so.

Illustrations

Figure 1: A *denarius* of Augustus.

Spivey, Nigel and Squire, Michael. *Panorama of the Classical World* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), p. 228, fig. 364.



Figure 2: A *solidus* of Heraclius the Elder and Heraclius I.

Catalogue of the Imperial Byzantine Coins in the British Museum, vol. 1 (39, p.188).



Figure 3: A *denarius* of Charlemagne.

Moffitt, John F. (2007) "Charlemagne's Denarius, Constantine's Edicule, and the Vera Crux," *Quidditas*: Vol. 28 , Article 5.



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