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A CROSSROADS OF CIVILIZATIONS: BYZANTIUM

EVEN before Constantine decided to move the capital of the civilized world to the old Byzantium in 330, the Roman emperors had come to realise the vital importance of the region; Galerius had favoured Salonica, Diocletian Nicomedia; but Constantine was the first, if we except Septimus Severus, to confirm the oracle's cryptic statement made almost a millennium before to the men who set out from Megara to found a new colony, "First find the city of the Blind and then settle opposite". He was referring to Chalcedon, on the Asiatic coast for truly any who sought to dominate eastern Europe and western hither-Asia could be counted as blind if they ignored the potentialities of the site of Byzantium. The triangular spit of land, bordered by the sea of Marmora to the South and the inlet known as the Golden Horn to the North, was unsurpassed for its defensive position; the Golden Horn provided a superb harbour, and the city commanded the vital trade routes of the age, notably those by land from West to East and that by sea from North to South.

It may have been the danger of Barbarian invasions across the Danube from south Russia and the growing strength of the Sassanian rulers of Persia that most influenced Constantine's choice at the time it may have been a desire to escape from the influence of Pagan Rome; but the wisdom of his choice was to be substantiated a thousand times in the centuries that were to follow, not only on military grounds, but also for political and more especially, for economic reasons.

Almost two centuries were however to elapse before the choice of the new site for the capital of the civilized world was fully justified, for it was not really till well on in the fifth century that Italy ceased to be an active centre of progress and cultural development. True, Rome fell to the Barbarians in 410 and Goths and Ostrogoths were soon in control of much of Italy, but independent emperors still held sway in the West, first at Rome, then at Milan and then at Ravenna, and consuls were appointed both at Rome and at Constantinople until the office was abolished by Justinian in 541. Yet the influence of Constantinople was gradually increasing, that of the Italian cities declining, and when Justinian came to the throne in 525, there was no question as to where

the main centre of power, the primary source of activity and progress, lay. What may be termed the Early Christian Age had almost imperceptibly come to an end; the new Byzantine age had dawned and its centre, its hub, was undisputably Constantinople, and inspite of the prosperity of such cities as Antioch, Alexandria and Salonica, the city proved to be a magnet which attracted the best men from everywhere, even the East. Indeed, even before Justinian came to the throne, the ethos of the new capital had begun to assert itself both on the mentality of its inhabitants and on the nature of the art that flourished there. The outlook of the citizens of Byzantium was no longer that of a pagan Roman; people thought as Greeks and as Christians, and already, even in the bazaars, arguments as to the nature of the Trinity were occupying men's minds. Farther, a distinctive art had developed in which oriental elements had an important part to play in addition to those derived from Rome. The new style is clearly illustrated in the sculptures that decorated the newly discovered church of St. Polyeuktos, set up by Juliana Anicia soon after 500, or even more in those of Justinian's Sts. Sergius and Bacchus or of Hagia Sophia, built during an amazingly short period of five years after 532. The mixture of influences is perhaps best illustrated by Byzantine costume, where the Roman toga, the Greek chiton and the Oriental kaftan, developed into the *scaramangion*—a sort of tight fitting tunic—were all simultaneously in use.

Hagia Sophia was not Justinian's only contribution to architecture, and the buildings he sponsored at Constantinople and elsewhere were to exercise an enormous effect on the development of Christian architecture for a thousand years or more, all over Europe. He built at Ephesus on the model of his church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople and the plan, cruciform with five domes, was to be followed later not only in the East, notably in Cyprus, but also in the West; one may mention St. Mark's at Venice or St. Front at Périgueux. He built at Jerusalem and the circular plan of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was to be copied all over Europe; one may mention St. Benigne at Dijon or the Temple Church in London. He sponsored great mosaic decorations in the capital, which served as models for work done elsewhere, and today one can cite those at Ravenna or in St. Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai as typical of the style he favoured. These works not only serve to illustrate what was happening at Constantinople, for thanks first to Iconoclasm and then to the Turkish conquest, nothing survives in the city itself—they also illustrate in concrete visual terms the originality of the role that Constantinople had assumed, for we see here, just as much as in the plan or the sculptures of Hagia Sophia itself, an art which is wholly new, wholly distinctive. The city was the New Rome, and all the glory that accrued to the name of Rome was associated with it; but to that old glory something more had been added; a new culture, a new

civilisation, had been developed on the old base, and to this Greek thought, Christian belief and oriental splendour all had a contribution to make. We call the resulting civilization Byzantine, but it is important to remember that it took its name from the city founded by Byzas, that stood opposite to Chalcedon, the city of the blind. Even in Byzas' day it had controlled the trade routes to the North, whence, even then, valuable goods were imported; it was the mythical land of the Golden Fleece, where the art of the Scythians, with its profusion of gold, was later to justify the appellation. And, as sea-trade developed, links with the South, though less spectacular, became even more important, for they led to the granaries of Egypt. By land the via Egnatia and its tributaries afforded communication with the old world to the West, while eastwards a whole network of roads led to Syria, to Mesopotamia, to Persia and to Egypt. Along all these routes ideas in thought and art moved as well as trade, so that in the world of the sixth century Constantinople was an unsurpassed natural centre. It was not only the capital of a Great Empire, but it was, even more, the very hub on which all the vital cultural contacts centred, and even in the seventh century—in the years of decline after the apex of Justinian—the contacts were of great significance.

But Byzantium did not maintain this position without a struggle. The Barbarians were a constant irritation in the North, the Sassanians a more established foe in the East, and in the seventh century Syria and Egypt were seized by the rising power of Islam; within a few years Arab forces were at the gates of the Byzantine capital itself. The attack was repulsed, thanks, the Byzantines believed, to the help of an icon of the Virgin, the city's protectress, and the Arabs were no more successful when they made a second attack in 717. They had realised the vital importance of the city, but were powerless against its fortifications, and thereafter military activities were restricted to the frontier regions of Syria and Asia Minor, while Constantinople remained the bastion of Christendom against Islam for another 736 years—a remarkably long link in the chain of the history of any civilization.

In spite of repeated frontier wars, however, communications between East and West were never more than temporarily interrupted, and trade on the one hand, thought and art on the other, exerted on the whole a greater influence than wars and disputes. Byzantine craftsmen were borrowed by Islamic patrons to adorn their buildings with mosaics, notably in the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem (692) and in the Great Mosque at Damascus (715), or to build a famous bridge at Baghdad. The art of the first dynasty of Islam, the Omayyad, is really little more than Byzantine art under a new complexion, while the organisation of the state was Byzantine in almost every detail. It was not until the centre of control moved to Mesopotamia with the establishment of

the Abbasid dynasty in 750 that a civilization that was truly Islamic began to develop.

Thereafter, though Byzantine elements continued to affect the East, Byzantium also took on the role of receiver. Eastern motifs of decoration, like the kufic script, were adopted in the Byzantine area, and one of the Emperors even set up a pavilion in the eastern style within the confines of the Great Palace which was called the Persian House; the style of its decoration is perhaps reflected in the mosaics of the Norman stanza in the Royal palace at Palermo. Such factors as these serve to illustrate the cultural links that bind Constantinople to the East. They are also attested by the tangible evidence of Byzantine imports. At moments of political and economic prosperity there was an increasing demand for ivories, silks, perfumes and other eastern luxuries in Constantinople, while in the East Byzantine expertise was in constant demand, and it was really not till much of Asia Minor fell to the Seljuks in the second half of the eleventh century that this exchange was to some extant interrupted. Perhaps it was because of this, or perhaps for reasons of economy that Byzantine carvings in ivory at this time become extremely rare, whereas numerous examples have come down to us both from before the rise of Islam and from the tenth and earlier eleventh centuries.

The land routes were nevertheless busy to east, west and north, and an even more extensive trade was also carried by sea; indeed the bulk of the heavier objects seem to have been moved in that way. The new science of under-water archaeology is just beginning to throw light on this aspect of communication. Many of the wrecks that have been investigated on the seabed close to the western shores of Asia Minor were laden with amphorae, crude metal, even roofing tiles, and to judge by the number of wrecks that have been found at one or two danger spots along the coasts the sea-borne trade between Constantinople, Smyrna and Antioch must have been very extensive.

There must have been an equally important trade across the waters of the Black Sea. Trebizond, at its eastern extremity was one of the ports that served the most important trade route in the world, the famous Silk Road, leading to the Caucasus, to Persia and thence to Central Asia and China. It passed through Armenia, which had been a Christian country from the earliest times, and its art and history were closely bound up with Byzantium, and Byzantine emperors had more than once been of Armenian stock. The same route also gave access to Georgia, which in any case in later times was even more closely bound to Constantinople by political and artistic ties than was Armenia. And the region to the North must not be forgotten, for the far eastern trade sometimes passed north of the Caspian as well as to the South. It was controlled by the Khazars, who played quite an important role in Byzantine history from the ninth century onwards. They came to the rescue of Constanti-

nople on more than one occasion, and they furnished at least one bride for a Byzantine emperor (Leo IV). In early times the Byzantines depended on this area for furs, honey, tallow and slaves; later when the Rus had adopted Christianity, the debt owed to Constantinople was so important that it may even be questioned whether Russia could have evolved as it did without its Byzantine contacts. In the tenth century Russian merchants had their own quarters in Constantinople, in the St. Mamas region, where they were allowed to reside during the summer. They took back various merchandise to Russia, notably textiles. These contacts with the North of course became especially important after the establishment of a Christian state at Kiev at the end of the tenth century. Vladimir, the founder of the Russian state, married a Byzantine princess; the church in Russia was under the control of the Patriarch at Constantinople, and Russian art and culture were directly based on Byzantine models. Close contacts were to continue, inspite of the wedge driven into Russia from the east by the Mongols in the thirteenth century; when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453 Moscow almost automatically became the third Rome. Nor must the role of Russia as an intermediary between Byzantium and the North be forgotten, for these links were to prove of great service both to Byzantium and to Scandinavia, and it was also along this route that the Varangians came to Constantinople.

For a city to serve as a cross-road, the routes from it must run in all directions, and from Constantinople those to West and South were no less important than those to North and East. The Balkans in fact represented an area of the greatest importance to Byzantium, and Byzantium was vital to the Balkans. The political history of the first Bulgarian empire, which was founded in 679 and lasted till 1018, was closely bound up with that of Byzantium both as enemy and as ally. The Bulgarian king Tervel was thus granted the title of Caesar by Justinian II, but on Justinian's death he attacked Byzantium in 713; there were repeated engagements in the years that followed, and at the end of the ninth century a more accomplished leader appeared in the person of Tsar Simeon (893–927) who again shared the roles of enemy and Basileus. It was not until the mid-eleventh century that the Byzantines were decisively victorious, thanks to the energy of Basil II, the Bulgar slayer. But long before then, as a result of the missionary zeal of Cyril and Methodius, the Bulgars had adopted Orthodox Christianity, and with it had taken over a wholly Byzantine literature, art and culture; the church of Hagia Sophia at Ochrid and its paintings indeed represent what are virtually Byzantine monuments on soil which, at the time of its construction shortly before 1050, was part of the Bulgarian empire. And the Second Bulgarian Empire (1186–1393), though founded as a result of Byzantine political and military weakness, depended to an even greater degree on Byzantine inspiration; it was indeed the Constantinopolitan element in its culture

that saved it from provincialism, and though the art of the Second Bulgarian Empire was to some degree individual, the finest monuments, like the wall paintings at Boiana of 1259, are nevertheless to a considerable degree impregnated with Constantinopolitan elements.

The effects of the missionary activities of Cyril and Methodius were of the first importance in the area. True, their first preachings in Hungary left little legacy behind, for though political contacts were maintained, Hungary was soon to be embraced within the sphere of Rome so far as religion was concerned. But Macedonia, whether under the control of the Bulgarian or Serbian state, continued as Orthodox; it was therefore to remain a vital centre of an art and culture which were essentially Byzantine, even if the rulers were independent. Distinctive local schools of art and painting were to develop there on the Byzantine model, and Greek was used quite freely even when Slavonic became the spoken and literary language. The links with Constantinople are most clearly illustrated in painting. Thus the decoration of the little church of Nerez near Skopolje, set up by a member of the Comnene family in 1164, represents the most important monument of the metropolitan art of the age that has come down to us; it served as the model for work done at Kurbinovo and Kastoria some thirty years later in a more provincial style. Paintings in Serbia, notably those at Mileseva and Sopoćani, were also Metropolitan in character, though the numerous decorations done around 1300 in southern Serbia and northern Macedonia for King Milutin, though basically Byzantine, perhaps owe a more direct debt to Salonica and to Slav influence than to the Byzantine capital.

Relationships between Byzantium and the regions further to the west, all of which fell within the Papal or Catholic sphere of influence, were more intermittent, but it is safe to say that but for Byzantium the West would never have been quite the same; indeed western Christendom might never have developed had the early advance of Islam not been halted at the frontier of Asia Minor. But this is speculation: in the realm of fact it can be stated categorically that the West was to look to the East again and again from the eighth century onwards. The culture of Charlemagne's had to thank Byzantium for a great deal; the links were more forcibly renewed in the time of the Ottonians; Anglo-Saxon art in England often owed a marked debt to Constantinople—witness the stole of St. Cuthbert, an English embroidery made between 909 and 916 on a Byzantine model; Byzantine silks were used as shrouds for the burial of many an emperor or saint in Germany and France, and the decorations of the silks were copied by local stone-masons on capitals and tympana. And nowhere of course were the links more important than in the case of Sicily, where the Norman rulers borrowed craftsmen from Constantinople and whence many Byzantine features in art and culture were transmitted to France and England: some paintings in St. Anselm's

chapel at Canterbury thus follow a Byzantine model which must have reached England via Norman Sicily.

These contacts with the northern west-Germany, France, Britain were maintained partly by land, partly by sea, but for Italy, and especially for southern Italy, the sea route from Byzantium was vital. Byzantine naval power suffered periodic set-backs from the time that the Arabs realised the significance of sea power in the seventh century, but throughout most of the age from the foundation of Constantinople till the twelfth century the Byzantine navy kept the east Mediterranean open to shipping and her commercial fleet assured her a prosperous and lucrative trade; it was only then, in return for financial loans and military aid, that the Venetians and the Genoese were granted trading concessions which eventually enabled them to obtain a stranglehold on Byzantine maritime commerce. Yet even then, when Byzantium was at its weakest in the commercial and political spheres, and when the Normans had established their independence in southern Italy and Sicily, Constantinople was still able to exercise an astonishing influence on the development of art, and not only the mosaics of Sicily, all dating from between about 1140 and 1190, but also many of those in the region of Venice were the work of Byzantine craftsmen. They represent a striking instance of the power of a way of thought and a style in art, which was to survive in spite of political vicissitudes, and when Constantinople itself was in the hands of the Latins between 1204 and 1261 there must have been a diaspora of artists, who established schools of metropolitan excellence as far afield as Trebizond in the East, at Mileseva and Sopoćani in the West, and at Vladimir in the North. In all these places monuments survive which reflect the style of the best art of the Byzantine capital of around 1200, and the same influence was even exercised in the Islamic world as some very Byzantine miniatures in an Arabic version of the *Materia Medica* of Dioscorides, done in 1229, serves to prove.

The Byzantine story ends with the Palaeologue age, when the once proud empire comprised little more than the immediate hinterland of Constantinople. Though politically the Empire was weak and economically it was impoverished, art continued to flourish to such a degree that this last phase is usually known as the Palaeologue Renaissance. It was different in character and degree from the Renaissance that was born at much the same time in Italy, but it was, in its own way, a Renaissance in the most significant sense of the term, that is to say a phase when old themes and old motifs were given a new and vigorous lease of life; we see in literature and more especially in the visual arts—the lovely mosaics of Kariye Camii, the former church of St. Saviour in Chora at Constantinople may be cited. Cimabue, Cavallini, Giotto and Duccio owed a considerable debt to this art. The West had to thank such men as George Genistos, Plethon and Bessarion, later to become

a Catholic Cardinal, for the transmission of classical learning. Russia's debt was not only a legacy from the expansive days of the tenth and eleventh centuries; it was continuous and continuing: and one great painter who was to make his name in Russia, Theophanes the Greek, was schooled in Constantinople. In the Balkans a new state was growing up in Moldavia; in spite of the growth of Ottoman power throughout the fifteenth century, Moldavia was able to develop as an independent state, its culture founded on and inspired by Byzantium. The phrase "Byzance après Byzance" has been aptly coined to describe it. The routes of contact from Byzantium both to this area and to Russia—cultural, economic, political—were still active. And even in the West the reverence for Byzantium's continuity lived on, even though petty jealousies, narrow nationalism, biased ambitions, precluded a true understanding of the critical nature of the position. Byzantium had seemed immortal and the Islamic victories of 1453 shocked the Christian world, even if their inevitability had produced no concrete reaction in the years that went before.

But if the Moslem conquest of Byzantium came as a blow to Christendom, it nevertheless meant a new period of prosperity for the city itself. Constantinople now Istanbul, became the centre of another vast empire, at its hey-day greater in extent even than that of Justinian. The harbours of the Golden Horn were once more filled with shipping, the land routes that centred on the city stretched to Arabia on the one hand and to Hungary on the other; a new, but nevertheless glorious programme of architectural development was set in hand in the service of Islam and the Sultans, and once more the city became the wonder of all who visited it—aloof perhaps, yet magnificent and immensely prosperous. And its prosperity continued even when Turkey became "the sick man of Europe". Only in 1922 did the glory to some extent depart, for the capital of the new Turkish state was transferred to Ankara. With the decline of political significance, even more with the development of air travel, the city became a less vital centre. Do these events mark the eclipse of the cities of Byzantium, Constantinople and Istanbul? One wonders.