

CONSTANTINE I, JUSTINIAN I, AND HERACLIUS:
PIVOTAL BYZANTINE EMPERORS OF THE 4TH – 9TH CENTURIES

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The Byzantine Empire had a few great emperors, a few poor emperors, and many mediocre emperors during the fourth through the ninth centuries. Three of the emperors who made the most impact on the Empire were Constantine I, Justinian I, and Heraclius. Constantine restructured the government and the economy, shifted power to the East, legalized Christianity, and watched over the beginnings of the solidification of Church doctrine. Justinian reconquered much of the beleaguered West in an attempt to restore the united Roman Empire, he revamped civil law, stopped the Nika riots, beautified Constantinople, and led the Empire through a devastating plague. Heraclius ended a destructive civil war, restructured the Byzantine military and economy, recovered the True Cross from the Persians, and saved Constantinople from Muslim conquest. Each emperor struggled to overcome great challenges during their reigns, each took extraordinary action to confront these challenges, and each changed the Empire in a significant and lasting way. This is not to say, however, that these emperors were perfect or that their legacies were not tinged by mistakes or unintended consequences. Rather, the totality of their contributions to the Empire had great impact that molded the Byzantine Empire into a powerful force that kept the Roman Empire alive for nearly one thousand years after the fall of the West.

Constantine I (reigned 306-337)

Before Constantine's accession to the purple, Diocletian (reigned 284-305) formed a Tetrarchy to divide the administrative duties of the Empire. The Tetrarchy created western and eastern administrative spheres, each ruled by an Augustus (senior emperor) and a Caesar (junior emperor). The overall unity of the Roman Empire remained intact since all four rulers considered themselves co-emperors within the united Empire. Diocletian also continued a trend in which

emperors became further removed from ordinary people and more divinely grand.¹ They became more autocratic, and the Dominate replaced the Principate of Augustus. In the midst of these changes, Constantine I rose to the status of Caesar of the West after the death of his father, Constantius I. Constantine later achieved the status of Augustus of the West after the death of Severus II. He then defeated his rival Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, where he may have received a Christian vision that would eventually transform the Empire. Constantine went on to defeat the Augustus of the East, Licinius, at the Battle of Chrysopolis in 324. Now, Constantine ruled both the Western and Eastern administrative spheres, effectively ending Diocletian's Tetrarchy. This was a significant action, as it dismantled Diocletian's effort to combat the problem of the Empire's immense size.

One of Constantine's most memorable and lasting accomplishments was the establishment of Byzantium, later renamed Constantinople, as a "New Rome" in the East. This act makes Constantine the first Byzantine emperor, but much work was necessary to secure the success of his new capital in the East. The Third Century Crisis severely damaged the integrity of the Empire, prompting Diocletian's creation of the Tetrarchy. The prestige of the Empire had sunk to unprecedented lows, and that the imperial city of Rome was on the decline. Therefore, Constantine hoped that his new Rome at Constantinople could serve as a rallying point for the eastern provinces and could be a gleaming jewel in an empire that was badly tarnished by the aftermath of the Third Century Crisis.

In many ways, Constantine continued many of Diocletian's reforms. For example, he continued consolidating power under the umbrella of the emperor. According to George Ostrogorsky, "Everything that was connected with the person of the Emperor tended to grow in

¹ Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2001), 248.

significance.”² However, while certainly an autocrat, he wisely surrounded himself with able bureaucrats, such as the *magister officiorum* and the *quaestor sacri palatii*, who could help with governmental duties. Constantine and his bureaucratic team enacted numerous reforms to tackle the economic, agricultural, military, and cultural problems that remained from the Third Century Crisis and that had persisted beyond Diocletian’s reign. Like Diocletian, Constantine hoped to restore the integrity of the state through the various reforms, while also enhancing his own prestige as well.

To guard against the external and internal dangers that characterized the Third Century Crisis, Constantine developed the *exercitus comitatensis* into an effective personal guard, since many previous emperors fell to assassins. This reform had the dual benefit of creating commanders-in-chief who reported directly to the emperor, helping to stabilize the military condition of the Empire as a whole.³ Constantine was acutely aware of the significant external threats to his empire, but he was also aware of the internal threats that potentially lurked inside his own palace. While he killed his way to sole emperorship by defeating Maxentius and Licinius, he knew that he needed to install safeguards to protect himself from further civil war and to stabilize the Empire from the numerous external threats that surrounded the Empire.

Perhaps Constantine’s most important contribution to the Byzantine Empire, and to Western Civilization as a whole, was his legalization of Christianity. Before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge against Maxentius in 312, sources state that Constantine saw a vision or had a dream that prompted him to order his army to adorn their shields with the Greek letters chi and rho, the first letters of the name Christos. He won the victory against Maxentius, and he gave the

² George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 37.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

credit to the Christian God.⁴ He subsequently legalized Christianity through the Edict of Milan, which returned Church property and granted full liberty of worship.⁵ Christianity expanded rapidly, eventually becoming the official religion of the Empire under Theodosius I (reigned 347-395).

While legalizing Christianity had major implications for the Empire, historians do not all agree about Constantine's motives concerning Christianity. Pat Southern suggests that Constantine may have fabricated the Chi-Rho symbol he placed on the shields of his soldiers at the Milvian Bridge in order to invent a standard that the Empire could rally around, while also not antagonizing the large groups of non-Christians within the Empire.⁶ Perhaps Constantine believed that religious unity would help hold the Empire together. As Leo Davis asserts, Constantine believed that "a common orthodox faith was necessary for the preservation of a unified Empire."⁷ This assertion is based on Constantine's early life.

Constantine followed his father in abandoning the traditional polytheistic paganism of the Empire in favor of a "philosophic monotheism," governed by a solar deity of the sun god cult of Aurelian (reigned 270-275).⁸ Constantine believed, like Aurelian, that religion was a force powerful enough to help unite an otherwise disunited empire. Diocletian also believed in the uniting power of religion, but he restored Jupiter and Hercules to prominence in the pantheon and elevated himself as an eastern-style emperor-god, leaving Aurelian's sun god behind and initiating a campaign of persecution against Christians.⁹ Just as Constantine dismantled Diocletian's Tetrarchy less than a generation after its founding, he likewise reversed Diocletian's

⁴ Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/The Liturgical Press, 1990), 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ Southern, 281.

⁷ Davis, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Southern, 153-154.

restoration of Jupiter and Hercules to prominence in favor of monotheism. His victory at the Milvian Bridge, if the story of his vision of the Chi-Rho is true, pushed Constantine away from Aurelian's sun god toward the Christian God. As Christianity was already spreading throughout the Empire, he may simply have placed a bet on Christianity that paid off for him and for Christians.

Constantine lived in a world in which the emperor served as *pontifex maximus* (chief priest) of the state religion. With Christianity legalized and spreading rapidly, Constantine oversaw the early stages of shaping and solidifying Christian doctrine. Continuing his push toward monotheism in a polytheistic world, Constantine called the Council of Nicaea in 325 to sort out the monotheistic nature of God. This was the first of many such Ecumenical Councils. While Christianity did not become the state religion until the reign of Theodosius I, Constantine's focus on Christianity certainly marked a new era for the Empire. His efforts also laid the foundation for the fusion of Christianity and imperial authority that continued as an integral part of what would later become what we know today as the Byzantine Empire. While the establishment of Constantinople makes Constantine the first Byzantine emperor, his numerous military and economic reforms and his legalization and promotion of Christianity make him one of the most important Byzantine emperors as well.

Justinian I (reigned 527-565)

The West deteriorated rapidly during the intervening years between Constantine and Justinian, particularly after the reign of Theodosius I. Alaric the Visigoth sacked Rome in 410, Genseric (Gaiseric) the Vandal did the same in 455. Rome, while still ecclesiastically important as a Holy See of the Church, lost most of its temporal importance to the Empire. Unfortunately, Ravenna, the imperial capital during the 400s, also began to lose power and prestige. As the

central government of the West broke down, Roman elites began to curry favor with the Gaulish or Visigothic courts instead of the Roman court at Ravenna. Of this disastrous phenomenon, Chris Wickham explains, “These were political shifts which made a lot of sense to local actors, but they were fatal to what remained of the empire.”¹⁰ In 476, Odoacer (Odovacer) captured Ravenna, deposing emperor Romulus Augustus. With that, Rome essentially lost control of its western territories and Constantinople became the sole seat of Roman authority.

Justin I (reigned 518-527), had been a peasant swineherd, but rose to prominence as a soldier, becoming a successful general and ascending to the purple after the death of Anastasius I. Justin’s nephew, Flavius Petrus Sabbatius, helped the elderly Justin with various administrative duties during his reign. Flavius, who eventually took the name “Justinian” to pay tribute to his uncle, may have served as the *de facto* ruler of the Empire in Justin’s later years. This gave Justinian a rare opportunity to learn the intricacies of ruling an Empire without being the lightning rod if he made a mistake or enacted an unpopular policy. Upon Justin’s death, Justinian I ascended to the purple in his own right.

As Justin did before him, Justinian marshalled the talents of great people around him to create the conditions requisite for greatness. Belisarius and Narses, two of the greatest generals in history, helped Justinian realize his vision for a reunited Roman Empire, which included recapturing Ravenna and Rome. Justinian hired the best artists and artisans in the Empire to beautify the city of Constantinople, adorning it with some of the most impressive buildings and works of art in the world. To pay for his expensive wars and building projects, Justinian hired John the Cappadocian to reform the tax system and increase internal revenue. He consulted with a jurist named Tribonian to reform the legal system in a way that set precedents for our legal

¹⁰ Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London: Penguin, 2009), 91.

code today. Perhaps his most unlikely advisor was his wife, a former actor and prostitute named Theodora, who offered wise council during his reign.

Justinian, like other Romans of the time, likely still viewed the Empire as united, despite the separate administrative halves created by Diocletian and continued during the reigns of Theodosius I and others emperors.¹¹ Although ruling from Greek-influenced Constantinople, Justinian spoke Latin as a first language, probably the last emperor to do so.¹² He hoped to reverse the trend of continuing divergence between the Latin West, what was left of it, and the Greek East. He also hoped to save Christianity from the Arian heresy, which had spread throughout the Germanic tribes of the West. As Ostrogorsky put it, “it was his sacred mission to free Roman lands from the yoke of barbarian invaders and Arian heretics, and to restore the ancient frontiers of a single Roman and orthodox Christian Empire.”¹³ To this end, he rejected Monophysitism, as Justin had done before him, to bridge the ecclesiastical divide between the Byzantine Empire and the Church of Rome. According to Ostrogorsky, this act was “an essential preliminary to the realization of his political ambitions in the West.”¹⁴ In addition to Justinian’s religious motives for reuniting East and West, Justinian probably chafed at the thought of being a “Roman” emperor without having control of Rome itself. This meant military action. Through the work of the brilliant general Belisarius and the eunuch Narses, Justinian secured northern Africa and much of Italy, including Rome itself. For a short while, the Mediterranean was once again a “Roman lake.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ostrogorsky, 69.

¹² Wickham, 91.

¹³ Ostrogorsky, 69.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 71.

Domestically, Justinian and Tribonian composed the *Corpus Iurus Civilis*, which organized the laws of the Empire. Rather than focusing on brutal punishments, such as Hammurabi's eye gouging¹⁶ or the hurling of criminals from the Tarpeian Rock¹⁷ in the Roman Republic's *Twelve Tables*, Justinian's Code focused on complex legal issues such as marriage, adoption, wills, and commerce. These issues were likely important to Justinian because of their connection to the moral character of the Empire. After all, he hoped to distance the Empire from heresies that had caused division and had alienated Constantinople from the Roman Church. He may also have hoped to make Constantinople a shining example to the barbarians that surrounded him, particularly those he hoped to subdue in the West.

In contrast to an attempt at some degree of moral purity and legal efficiency, a more blatant way to show off the greatness and superiority of the Byzantine Empire was through the accumulation of wealth and the beautification of Constantinople. Thanks to a lull in hostilities with Persia, a long-time nemesis, Justinian managed to establish trade routes to the Levant, northern Africa, Mesopotamia, and lands as far east as China. With the help of some monks, he smuggled silk worms into Constantinople and began making Byzantine silk.¹⁸ This created a domestic silk industry that was quite profitable. Domestic revenues from the silk industry and the tax reform orchestrated by John the Cappadocian combined with the external revenues from Belisarius's early military victories provided funds Justinian used to beautify the city of Constantinople. Using the talents of artists and artisans from around the Empire, he made Constantinople one of the largest and most impressive cities in the world.

¹⁶ See law 196 of Hammurabi's Code; L. W. King, trans., "The Code of Hammurabi," The Avalon Project, Yale University, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp> (accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁷ See Table VIII, no. 23 of The Twelve Tables; Allan Chester Johnson et al., trans., "The Twelve Tables," The Avalon Project, Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/twelve_tables.asp (accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁸ Ostrogorsky, 75.

Unfortunately, the cost of the military campaigns and the public works projects placed a heavy burden on the Byzantine tax base. As a result, Justinian became unpopular with large segments of the population. This disenchantment reached a peak during the Nika riots of 532. At the Hippodrome, rioting between the Blue and Green factions ignited, eventually spreading throughout the city. Fires raged throughout the city, and Justinian weighed his options. According to Procopius, Justinian contemplated fleeing the city. Theodora assured Justinian that it would be easy to flee because of their wealth, their access to the sea, and their boats. However, she would rather die a reigning queen than live as a former queen, famously stating, “May I never be separated from this purple, ...royalty is a good burial-shroud.”¹⁹ Justinian’s reaction to Theodora’s advice and to the destructive riots says a great deal about his personality. With the help of Belisarius and Narses, Justinian rounded up thousands of the Blue and Green rioters and executed them. Such violent action almost appears out of character for an emperor who sought to heal divisions in the Church and who cared deeply about civil law. However, he also cared deeply about unity and the hope of reunification of the Roman world, and he was willing to wage numerous wars across Africa and Europe to get it. Factional divisions, exemplified by the violent Nika riots, were incompatible with his quest for unity. Perhaps, in his mind, he had no choice.

One positive outcome of the Nika riots was the flurry of building projects Justinian inaugurated in their wake. The rioters burned the great church in Constantinople, giving Justinian the opportunity to rebuild it. In its place rose the Hagia Sophia, a monumental structure that dwarfed the previous church. With its massive dome, the Hagia Sophia stood as the largest church in the world.²⁰ Today, it remains an impressive structure, though it was converted into a

¹⁹ Procopius *Wars* 1.24.37; H. B. Dewing, trans., *History of the Wars, Books I and II* by Procopius (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), Project Gutenberg eBook, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16764/16764-h/16764-h.htm#BOOK_I (accessed August 8, 2015).

²⁰ Ostrogorsky, 73.

mosque after Constantinople's fall to the Muslims in 1453. Dedicated to the "holy wisdom" of God, it symbolized Justinian's religious fervor and his love of learning.

In the early years of the construction of Hagia Sophia, a devastating plague ravaged the Empire. The population was decimated, quite literally, and this undoubtedly had great psychological ramifications for those who survived. In addition, the loss of population shrank the tax base, limited those fit for military duty, and disrupted the economy of the Empire. For Justinian, the timing of the plague was disastrous. It struck in the midst of his revitalization projects and military conquests. The fact that Belisarius and Narses managed to continue to advance against the barbarians in Italy while suffering catastrophic personnel shortages makes his achievements all the more impressive. While Justinian survived the plague and was able to lead the Empire through its aftermath, the damage was extensive and impossible for Justinian to reverse.

Justinian's ambitious military campaigns, complicated by the plague, spread the Empire's resources dangerously thin. Justinian spent enormous amounts of money to secure help from the Franks and other tribes during his conquest of Italy. In addition, Belisarius needed reinforcements from Constantinople to complete his conquests in Africa and again for his effort to take and keep the city of Rome. Garrisons had to be stationed throughout the newly conquered lands to hold them. The military expense was enormous, draining the imperial treasury. In addition, Justinian's focus on the reclamation of the West took the focus away from the Slavs and Persians, who took advantage of their opportunity to invade Byzantine lands. Eventually, invaders undid most of Justinian's military gains, and the Empire was exhausted, militarily and economically.²¹

²¹ Ibid., 78.

Despite the great advances, Ostrogorsky states, “Justinian had meant his reign to inaugurate a new era, but it really marked the close of a great age.”²² Nevertheless, one must bear in mind the unexpected hardships Justinian endured during his reign. If not for the plague’s devastating effects, the tax base in Constantinople might have maintained sufficient funds to offset the great building projects. Likewise, the gains of Belisarius and Narses might have come more quickly and with lower costs had the ravages of the plague not dwindled the number of available soldiers. Furthermore, if not for the plague, the conquered territories might have been more fruitful, supplying Constantinople with tax revenue, food, and raw materials. Perhaps Justinian was simply a victim of unexpected circumstances and terrible timing. Despite the unfortunate end of his reign and the struggles of his successors, Justinian deserves recognition for the monumental accomplishments of his reign. He was most certainly one of the greatest Byzantine emperors of the fourth through the ninth centuries.

Heraclius (reigned 610-641)

The aftermath of Justinian’s reign was characterized by economic calamity, territorial losses, and civil war. Of Justinian’s successors, perhaps the ablest was a brilliant soldier named Maurice. Ostrogorsky counts Maurice as “one of the most outstanding of Byzantine rulers.”²³ He fought to hold on to Justinian’s conquests in the West, but the turmoil that gripped the Empire thwarted him. Phocas, a half-barbarian usurper, seized an opportunity to overthrow Maurice in the midst of yet another violent clash between the Blues and the Greens. Phocas captured Maurice and his sons and executed them. This left the Empire in a condition that Leo Davis depressingly describes as, “in ruins, its people demoralized, its finances exhausted, its army and

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 80.

administration in disarray, [and] its frontiers in east and west overrun by alien peoples.”²⁴ The exarch (governor) of Roman Carthage, a general named Heraclius the Elder, deposed Phocas in 610 with the help of his son, likewise named Heraclius. The younger Heraclius acceded to the throne when his father died shortly thereafter, beginning a new dynasty amidst very unfavorable circumstances and achieving a level of success that places him among the greatest Byzantine emperors of the fourth through the ninth centuries.

The reign of Heraclius marked a dramatic shift toward a civilization that was distinctly different from ancient Roman civilization. Although residents of Constantinople considered themselves Roman, little remained of ancient Roman culture. The reign of Heraclius marked a shift toward all things Greek, leaving the Latin language and culture of the old Roman Empire behind. He spoke Greek, made Greek the official language of the Empire, and gave Greek titles to the nobility.²⁵ In addition, his reign collapsed into a period largely devoid of literary sources, a time many historians consider the Byzantine Dark Age. As with Justinian, the Empire suffered considerable calamity and strife following Heraclius’s reign, but what Heraclius was able to accomplish during his reign is certainly worthy of note.

Because Heraclius inherited an empire in dire straits and with few economic resources, he struggled to pay for the mercenaries that had traditionally made up a large portion of the Byzantine army. To solve this problem, Heraclius developed the “thematic” system. Having its roots in the reforms of Maurice, this system divided the Empire into regions, known as themes. Similar to the “provincial” system that formed the governmental framework during the Principate, the thematic system united the civil and military spheres to militarize the Empire into

²⁴ Davis, 258.

²⁵ Ostrogorsky, 106.

a powerful force that could once again stand up to its hostile neighbors.²⁶ Heraclius's new system offered land to soldiers, facilitating the spread of military might across the Empire. In the event of an attack from a hostile neighbor, these soldiers had a personal interest in defending their own land. This created a powerful domestic fighting force, which was essential in the absence of funds to hire mercenaries. Land was plentiful, perhaps because of the plague and the civil wars between Maurice and Phocas, so the thematic system used the available land to militarize the countryside.

Heraclius's most impressive achievement was his military successes against the powerful Sassanid Persian Empire, which had recovered from the plague and once again threatened Byzantine territory. Thanks to a strong navy and Constantinople's nearly impenetrable walls, Heraclius kept the Persians from taking Constantinople. Coincidentally, this also kept the Persians from attempting once again a conquest of Greece, as Persian kings Darius and Xerxes had tried to do over a thousand years before. Unfortunately, however, Heraclius could not protect Jerusalem from Persian attack, and the Sassanids captured the relic of the True Cross. After having raised his domestic army under the thematic system, Heraclius was ready to launch what was essentially a holy war against the Sassanid Persians to recover the True Cross.²⁷

To fund his military endeavors, Heraclius instituted economic reforms, such as the revaluing of the precious metal currency and the standardization of weights and measures, both of which helped with trade. In addition, because tax revenue was quite limited due to depopulation and a stagnating economy, Heraclius turned to the Church for financial aid. Heraclius forged an alliance with Patriarch Sergius, pouring some of the vast wealth of the

²⁶ Ibid., 100.

²⁷ Davis, 259.

Church into the empty treasury of the Empire.²⁸ Personally leading the troops against the Persians, something no Roman emperor had done for centuries, Heraclius gained great successes. He recovered the relic of the True Cross, crushed the Persian military force, and ended the Persian threat against the Empire.

Having restructured the Byzantine government, rebuilt the military, restructured the economy, and defeated the long-time Persian enemies, Heraclius was poised to be remembered as one of the greatest emperors in history. Unfortunately, his successes proved fleeting. Heraclius's focus on destroying Sassanid Persia was a wise move at the time, but what Heraclius did not know would ultimately lead to the undoing of nearly all his achievements. According to Wickham, "the last great Rome-Persia war ended with the exhaustion of both sides and the prostration of the loser."²⁹ The weakened Persian Empire fell victim to an energized army of Muslims bent on global conquest. The Muslims quickly absorbed Persia into its rapidly expanding empire. Additionally, Byzantine strongholds in the Levant, such as Jerusalem, and Byzantine territory in Egypt and other parts of North Africa also fell to the Muslims. Weakened by the long series of wars against the Persians, the Byzantine military was not up to the task of repelling the Muslims. Eventually, Muslim forces marched to the walls of Constantinople itself, but were repelled by a unique Byzantine weapon known as "Greek fire."

One might argue that the successful repulsion of the Muslims at the walls of Constantinople saved the Byzantine Empire from the fate of the Persians. To extend the argument still further, one could argue that Heraclius's defense of Constantinople and Carthage greatly delayed Muslim entry into Europe. Thus, Heraclius may have saved Christian Europe

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Wickham, 283.

from a Muslim takeover, buying time for Christianized tribes such as the Goths and the Franks to coalesce and entrench themselves before the eventual Muslim infiltration across Gibraltar.

Putting speculation aside, the stark reality is that as Heraclius' reign continued, he lost much of his empire. He repelled the Muslims from taking Constantinople and Carthage, but the Muslims made sizeable gains in other portions of the Empire. The increasing number of Byzantine defeats focused attention on Heraclius's faults, particularly his incestuous marriage to his niece, Martina. In a sense, Martina became a lightning rod for the ailments that afflicted the Empire in Heraclius's later years. The improper marriage between Heraclius and Martina raised eyebrows and generated criticism from its beginning, but complaints grew louder as the calamities mounted.³⁰

In matters of religion, Heraclius attempted to heal the religious differences of the Empire through the introduction of Monothelitism, the belief that Jesus has two natures but only one will. With the assistance of Patriarch Sergius, from whom Heraclius had previously received economic aid, this variant of Monophysitism was largely adopted by most Eastern bishops.³¹ However, rather than build unity between Christianity of the West and the East, Heraclius's compromise theology of Monothelitism drew the ire of theologians in the West. With this additional failure, nearly every aspect of Heraclius' lifetime of work had collapsed. Militarily, the Muslims ate away at his territorial gains. Under his successors, even more of the Empire fell, most notably Egypt. Economically, his wars against the Muslims drained the treasury and the Empire contracted dramatically. Religiously, his effort to heal the divisiveness of Monophysitism ended in his being labeled a heretic for advocating Monothelitism.

³⁰ Ostrogorsky, 112.

³¹ Davis, 269.

Under the circumstances, however, Heraclius achieved amazing success. He inherited an empire in crisis and built it up into a militarily successful powerhouse that toppled its age-old enemy, the Persians. He reformed the government and the economy, and he attempted to bridge the Monophysite divide within the Church. His actions left a tremendous lasting impact on the Byzantine Empire, although not all of that impact was positive in the end. Constantine and Justinian both reunited the Eastern and Western Empires briefly during their reigns, yet they failed to maintain the unity of the Empire beyond their own lifetimes. Likewise, Heraclius's great achievements collapsed rapidly in his later years and under his successors. Justinian encountered an unexpected calamity with the plague, just as Heraclius encountered the conquering Muslims. Justinian could not have anticipated that his wars of conquest in the West would have stretched imperial resources too thin to withstand the ravages of the plague. Likewise, Heraclius could not have anticipated that subduing Sassanid Persia would have paved the way for the armies of Muhammad and his militaristic successors to conquer Persia and eventually threaten Constantinople. As with Constantine and Justinian, the achievements of Heraclius were impressive and noteworthy, despite their ultimate undoing. Therefore, like Constantine and Justinian before him, Heraclius was one of the most important Byzantine emperors of the fourth through the ninth centuries.

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