

RADI DIKICI



THE HISTORY OF THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

(BYZANTIUM 330-1453)



Remzi Kitabevi

RADİ DİKİCİ

*The History of the
Byzantine Empire*

(Byzantium 330-1453)

Translated by
Aysel Hacır



Remzi Kitabevi

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Back cover image: The war between Heraclius and Khosrau II, by Pierro della Francesca (1415-1492).

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*To all of those Emperors and Empresses who
created such a magnificent civilization in this land*

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Introduction

“History comes alive each time it is written.”

The assumption that historical events and actors involved in the flow of history are frozen in the past and that history is over and done with is a false assumption. Every research into history, and every new discovery brings these events and actors back to life. This feeling comes over me whenever I read a book on history. New historical discoveries thrill me greatly. This is why I say history comes alive each time it is written.

It was in 2006 that I finished writing *Şu Bizim Bizans-Byzantium 330-1453 (This Byzantium of Ours-Byzantium 330-1453)*, which covers the 1123 years during which the Roman-Byzantine Empire ruled the lands that we, i.e. Turkish people, inhabit today. This book, published in 2007, was the product of more than 15 years of hard work and research. Was this book the last word on the subject? Definitely not: by 2012, five editions of the book had been published. In the interim, new findings supported by recent research, were unearthed and included in each successive edition.

It became necessary to incorporate into the book these newly discovered historical facts that I came across in the nearly fifty books on Roman-Byzantine Empire I read in the last five years. With so much new information to include the book had to be rewritten from scratch. My book entitled *Theodora* (its English edition appeared under the title *Empress Theodora*) was published in 2009, and my book entitled *Büyük Konstantin, Helena ve Fausta* (Constantine the Great, Helena, and Fausta) was published in 2011. These two books cover the years 330-565, a period of 235 years in the history of the Byzantine Empire. Actually, these are the first and second books of a trilogy. The third book entitled *İmparator Büyük Theodosius* (Emperor Theodosius the Great) was published in 2013. I had to study the period thoroughly in order to write such a trilogy. To begin, it was necessary for me to read at least fifteen biographical works to bring back to life the historical actors and events of the period. Of course, I included in the trilogy the new information that I obtained regarding this pe-

riod. Each new book that I read taught me more about life in Byzantium. The books that I had read previously contained some of the information that I came across in these works, which elaborated further on the subject. They provided answers to questions I had, such as the following: What was the culture of food and drink like in the Byzantine Empire? How did Byzantine people dress? How did they gather intelligence? What kind of warfare tactics did they use? How did the solid economic structure affect daily life? What was life in the palace like? What was the family structure like? How did the emperors get married? How important was love and sex; did they sometimes change the course of affairs in the empire? Why was religion the most important matter in the empire? These are only some of the many examples of questions I sought answers for.

Readers will see, through the images that have survived to the present day, what the emperors and empresses, and other important historical figures that have changed the course of history actually looked like.

This book covers the period from 330 to 1453 mainly. However, in order to shed more lighter on the events following the year of 330, it was necessary to include the period from 284 to 330 as well. In some instances, it was even necessary to revisit the year 235.

At this point, I need to clarify two points: The first point concerns the use of the terms “Eastern Roman Empire” and “Western Roman Empire,” and the second concerns the terms “Roman Empire” and “Byzantine Empire.” Although these terms are useful tools in writing about history, they seem to be used rather inappropriately in history books. Rome was the capital of the Roman Republic and the post-republican great Roman Empire persisted from 509 BC to 284 AD. Then Nicomedia (Izmit) became the capital of the empire and remained so for 46 years, between 284 and 330. Then Constantinople was the empire’s capital for 1123 years, from 330 to 1453. As such there was only one Roman Empire in the world until it collapsed in 1453.

The following event marks a turning point in the nearly 2400-year-long life of the empire: in 395, Theodosius the Great divided the empire between his two sons: Honorius began to rule the West, and Arcadius began to rule the East. When the Goths invaded Italy and overthrew the last Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476, the Western Roman Empire vanished off the face of the earth. In other words, the western half of the empire ceased to exist. Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire,

there was only one Roman Empire left: the Roman Empire whose capital was Constantinople. As a matter of fact, for at least 150 years, nearly until the end of Heraclius's reign (610-41), a good portion of Italy (including Rome, Ravenna, Naples, Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia, as well as southern Spain) remained within the borders of the Roman Empire. This empire, whose capital was Constantinople, was the only power that dominated all of the above-mentioned regions. In the light of this information, it becomes apparent that the term "Eastern Roman Empire" is wholly out of place. As a matter of fact, there was then no such state as the Western Roman Empire, but a single Roman Empire that called the shots in the land that had been ruled by the Western Roman Empire only for a short while. But the fact that certain historians frequently use the term "Eastern Roman Empire" or "the eastern part of the Roman Empire" to refer to the Byzantine Empire does not mean that we disrespect these historians. I simply do not agree with them on this usage.

As for the second point, no historian referred to the Roman Empire by any other name from 509 BC until AD 330, when Byzantium became Constantinople. After the year 330, historians, inspired by the name "Byzantium," began to refer to the Roman Empire as the Byzantine Empire. This later term began to be used more frequently, most notably after a 16th-century German historian, Hieronymus Wolf, used it instead of the term "Roman Empire" in his book entitled *Historiae Byzantinae*, which exercised a profound influence on later historians. To make a long story short, historians have been commonly referring to the great Roman Empire as the Byzantine Empire since 330. In other words, the term "Byzantine Empire" encompasses the period from 330 until 1453.

Actually, Cyril Mango made no secret of the fact that serious objections against the use of the term "Byzantine" can be and have been raised by historians. The term has nevertheless persisted, and according to Mango, it would be rather arrogant to refuse to use this term, provided that we use it merely as a useful label. In fact, there never existed a Byzantine "nation."⁽¹⁾ Moreover, as George Ostrogorsky wrote: "*Byzantine history is indeed only a new phase of Roman history, just as the Byzantine state is only a continuation of the old Imperium Romanum [the Roman Empire] The word 'Byzantine' is of course the expression of a later generation and was not used by the so-called 'Byzantines.' They always called themselves Romans and their emperor*

(1) Cyril Mango, *Byzantium-The Empire of The New Rome*, p. 9.

considered himself as a Roman ruler, the successor and heir of the old Roman Caesars. They remained under the spell of Rome as long as the empire lasted and to end the traditions of Roman government dominated their political thought and purpose.”⁽²⁾ In yet another example, the signature of the last Roman or Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XI Palaeologus (1449-53), was exactly as follows: “Constantine XI Palaeologus, in Christ true Emperor and Autocrat of the Romans.” As such, in this book, the term “Roman Empire” will be used when referring to the period until 330, and the term “Byzantine Empire” will be used when referring to the period after 330. We had chosen the title “Şu Bizim Bizans” (This Byzantium of Ours) for the first five editions of the book, based on this distinction. But for this printing, the title *History of the Byzantine Empire (Byzantium 330 – 1453)* is preferred.

At this point, I would like to clarify another issue: we frequently come across the years 5000 or 6000 in translated history books on the Byzantine Empire, as many translators do not prefer to convert these years. This is because the calendar used during the 1123 years of Byzantine rule was different than the one we use today. In this calendar, “O” indicated the year of the creation of the earth and of life on earth. It placed the date of creation at 5509 years (5493 years, according to Theophanes) before the birth of Jesus Christ. In other words, Byzantine people believed that human beings began to exist 5509 years before the birth of Jesus. The following two examples illustrate how the logic of this calendar is employed. According to the Byzantine calendar, Constantine made Constantinople the capital of his empire in $(330+5509=)$ 5839, and Niketas Khoniates wrote in his *Historia* that “Phransgis, Pisans and Venetians crossed the Bosphorus with their soldiers on 19 August 6711 (1203).”⁽³⁾ In the Byzantine calendar, the New Year started on September 1st.

Byzantine history is inseparable from the history of Constantinople. This city, that was initially called Byzantium and later renamed the New Rome-Constantinople, remained the center of the world from 330 into the 1000’s, as a unique city of unprecedented grandeur. With its magnificent palaces, churches, forums filled with sculptures and works of art, universities, and a countless building of great beauty, Constantinople was the cradle of civilization. All the cities in Europe, and even Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire, seemed like small towns when com-

(2) George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 28.

(3) Işın Demirkent, *Niketas Khoniates’in Historia’sı (Historia Nicetas Choniates)*, p. 122.

pared to Constantinople. So when the soldiers of the allied fleets, led by the Venetians, came to Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade, they were astounded by the grandeur of the city. The display of magnificence was far beyond their imaginings. It was exactly this splendor that lied at the root of the many misfortunes that Constantinople endured throughout history. As we will see later in the book, foreign powers sought to conquer the Byzantine Empire twelve times. We must add to it the number the many times Byzantine commanders or emperors who were removed from power attempted to seize the throne by laying siege to Constantinople. There were at least fifteen such attempts, some of which were successful. Foreign powers managed to conquer this city only twice: the first success was made by the Latins who conquered Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade, but this occupation lasted for a period of only 57 years. In 1453, Sultan Mehmed II, who put an end to all further attempts, made the second and final successful attempt.

During the 471 years of Ottoman rule, foreign powers never fully abandoned their goal to seize this city. There might still be people who dream of doing the same. There is a well-known saying that “all roads lead to Rome.” It is the common assumption that the city referred to in this saying is Rome, the capital of Italy, but this is certainly wrong. The saying actually refers to *la Nuova Roma*—the new Rome, i.e. Constantinople, established by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine the Great. The proof is the Milion Stone that remained the beginning marks for measurement of distances for all the roads in the world from 330 until 1453, the remains of the Milion are located near Hagia Sophia. This mile-marker monument stood for km. 0, from which all the distances were measured. What’s more, even during the rule of the Roman Empire there used to be a business near the Milion Stone that sold maps showing the distance between Constantinople and a variety of destinations.

In this book you will read about how the whole world was once under the sway of the Byzantine Empire, then the greatest empire of the world, and about how a single sentence or a seemingly insignificant event changed the course of history. You will read about how the head of the states that emerged after the 8th century had to obtain permission from Byzantine Emperors even to assume the title of king; and about how the four corners of Constantinople were adorned with splendid works of architecture; and about the festivities celebrating royal weddings and royal births. You will read about power struggles between mothers and sons, between fathers, sons and grandsons, and between brothers. You will read the colorful sto-

ries of the people who reigned over the Byzantine Empire, including the story about the woman who became empress after being selected in a beauty contest. You will learn about the words that are Byzantine in origin that we, albeit unknowingly, continue to use to this day; and about Byzantine customs and traditions, the Byzantine education system, the Byzantine church; and Byzantine literature, artworks, and international relations. To make a long story short, you will read about the Byzantine Empire, that emerged and blossomed on the very lands that we inhabit today, and the culture that we have inherited. And you will read about the aspects of the Byzantine Empire that official history did not teach us about.

I hereby acknowledge the following people and organizations for their contributions to this book: the Turkish Historical Society, the Foundation for the Social and Economic History of Turkey, Muhammed Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, Ahmed Cevdet Pasha and Prof. Fikret İşıltan, for their outstanding publications in translation on the Byzantine Empire; Prof. Işın Demirkent for her translations and also for her original works on the Byzantine Empire; Prof. Semavi Eyice, Prof. İlber Ortaylı, Orhan Duru, Adil Calap, Asım Baltacıgil, Bilge Umar, Elif Gökteke Tut, Derin Türkömer, Bilgi Altınok, Karolidi, Özden Arıkan, Prof. Beynun Akyavaş, Ercüment Melih Özbay, Fahameddin Başar, Erdem Yücel, Z. Zühre İlkelen, Maide Selen, Mehmet Harmancı, and Nezahat Baydur, who penned the book entitled *İmparator Iulianus* (Emperor Julianus); Cavit Çıtak and Sadi el Cidde, for allowing me to include in this book a letter by Prophet Muhammad which they preserve in their personal archives, and Yusuf Halef who kindly translated this letter for me; Sevgi Ağca, who is in charge of the Sacred Relics Section at the Topkapı Palace Museum; Ali İhsan Başcumalı and İrfan Mevlevi who know the locations of the Byzantine works in Istanbul like the palm of their hands, for walking around in the city with me for days in order to show me these works and for making it thus possible for me to take their photos; all foreign authors, notably Edward Gibbon, John Julius Norwich, James Allen Evans, Michael Grant, Judith Herrin, Catherine Holmes, Walter E. Kaegi, Lord Mahon, Cyril Mango, Donald M. Nicol, Steven Runciman, Warren Treadgold, G. P. Baker, Edward N. Luttwak, Jonathan Harris, Michael Kritovulos and George Ostrogorsky, and all the other authors whose names I will not mention here, but will detail in the bibliography section of this book; Ahmet Akyürek, who contributed greatly to the preparation of the family trees of the Byzantine imperial dynasties; my professors Enver Behnan Şapolyo, Prof. Seha Meray and Prof. Ahmet Şükrü Esmer, who has passed away; Aysel Hacı, who has

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I certainly cannot forget to thank those Byzantine historians who wrote the history of the Byzantine Empire; setting down in writing the events they witnessed during their lifetimes and the events that had taken place before. I would like to express my gratitude notably to Emperor Julianus the Apostate, and to Procopius, Zonaras, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ammianus Marcellinus, Philostorgius of Borissus, Zosimus, Malalas, Priscus, Socrates Scholasticus, Evagrius, Menander, John Cominatos, Nicephorus, Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, Leo the Deacon, Nicephorus Bryennius, George Acropolites, Ducas, John Skylitzes, John Cantacuzenos, Michael Attaleiates, Michael Psellus, John Kinnamos, Nicetas Choniates, Theophanes, Michael Critobulus, and Anna Comnena. There are at least fifty other historians whose names I can't mention here. Together with the above-mentioned historians, they blazed a trail that today's historians still follow and helped us better understand the Byzantine Empire.

Istanbul, 10 August 2015



Ruled by thirteen different dynasties over the course of 1123 years, Byzantium was one of the longest-lasting empires in history.

The History of the Byzantine Empire, in addition to the never-ending power struggle and politics, also encompasses a detailed account of art, culture, architecture and daily life in Byzantium, informing the reader of the essential building blocks that contribute to an important civilization.

The History of The Byzantine Empire further offers insight into how the Byzantine social and legal structures have affected the succeeding Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. Here history is not just about the past, but also informs how this rich heritage influences the future generations.



RADI DİKİCİ

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