CHAPTER TWO
HISTORY’S NEW COKE
(THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE)
2.1 Succession Solution--Diocletian

By the year AD 300, the idea that one needed to be born in Rome in order to be its emperor had long passed. The empire’s borders had extended far beyond that city on the Italian peninsula and incorporated all the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, as well as lands through northwestern Europe including parts of the island of Britain. The emperor at the time, Diocletian, was proof of this as he was born across the Adriatic in the Roman province of Dalmatia (in modern day Croatia).

Rome was an old city. Since it was the capital, many poor flocked to the city seeking assistance from the government. Keeping up infrastructure (roads, aqueducts, public buildings) and providing for the poor drained Rome’s money. Also, it was difficult for the emperor to control all the realm as communication, although exemplary for the time due to the Roman roads and control of the Mediterranean, was still slow.

Another problem facing the empire was determining who would become emperor next, or succession. Often in the Roman empire, succession was determined by the group who killed the emperor. In the previous 100 years, one of the major problems Rome had were emperors being assassinated by their own guards in order to install another one.

Diocletian solved this by splitting the empire in half. Each half would have an emperor (Augustus) and a “vice”-emperor (Caesar) that would be the emperor’s hand picked successor. Each of the four would have their own capital city and those cities were spread out throughout the empire. The hope of Diocletian was that emperors could maintain a Roman presence throughout the empire, keep the barbarians (anyone who was not apart of the Roman empire) who threatened their boundaries at bay, and also create a workable succession system for the emperor.
2.2 New Religion, New Capital--Constantine

However, even this system created for a peaceful transfer of power did not last long. Within 5 years of his retirement, the Augusts and Caesars fought to re-unite the empire under one ruler. The ensuing civil wars led to a victory by the Augustus, Constantine.

The Battle of Milvan Bridge was one of the most famous battles of the wars. The night before the battle, Constantine had a vision of a cross and the phrase “in this conqueror”. He ordered his men to place the Chi Rho (the first two Greek letters in the word for Christ) on their shields as he believed the vision was from the Christian God. The irony of this was that Diocletian within the previous decade had ordered one of the most fierce persecutions of Christians the Roman empire had known.

After Constantine’s victory, he proclaimed the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity (it did not make it the official religion of the empire, that occurred several decades later under a different emperor). Although not the official religion, Constantine did give Christianity an honored status. He sent his mother Helena into Judea, the land of the birth of Christianity, to mark out holy shrines. For example, Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity today is in the location Helena declared to be the place of Jesus’ birth over 1000 years ago.

Constantine also assisted Christianity with an internal dispute. Bishops, leaders of the Christian church, were in disagreement over the nature of Jesus. Was he God or someone created by God? Constantine used the royal treasury to pay for passage of the bishops for a church council to settle the dispute. In
terms of Christian beliefs, the Council of Nicaea affirmed the doctrine that Jesus was God. In terms of World History, it was the first time that political power and Christianity were working together. It would not be the last.

One of the most important accomplishments of Constantine’s reign was his moving the capital city from which he ruled to the city of Byzantium on the Bosporus Strait, in what is now Turkey. The move of the emperor east was not new. Diocletian had ruled from the East and it was even said that Julius Caesar himself had wanted the capital moved to the eastern part of the empire. The threat from the Persians to the east of the empire and the barbarians in the Balkans needed to be defended. Trade with Asia had made the eastern part of the empire wealthier as the city of Rome deteriorated.

In 330, six years after the site was selected, “Nova Roma” was dedicated (years later the name would be changed to honor the man who ordered it built, and would be known as Constantinople). Whereas Rome was a city built recognizing the old gods of Jupiter and Apollo, Constantinople was built with a focus on the newly legal Christian religion. The official movement of the power of Rome further hurt the actual city of Rome as many of the brightest and best made their way to the new capital on the shores of the Bosporus Strait.

http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/d/g/dga11/HS10_13_Byzantium_map.htm
2.3 We All Fall Down--The Fall of Rome

The decline of the city of Rome happened over a long period of time, but many assign the ending event to be the seizing of the throne by the Germanic solider Odoacer in 476. The western empire had fallen. There were many reasons for this. One reason was that the west was hard to defend. The Danube River was a long boundary that needed men and supplies to protect. Many Roman citizens did not want to join the ranks of the army, so Rome needed to hire Germanic tribes to defend them (who were loyal to their generals more than Rome). Another reason was that large farm estates were making it difficult for small farmers to earn a living. Many went to Rome to find work, but there were not enough jobs. The government, in order to gain favor of the populace, would supply the people of Rome with free wheat and shows, or “Bread and Circuses”. Of course, providing the people with this cost money. Since Rome was no longer conquering new lands, new gold was not being brought into the city. They began to create more coins by including less gold and silver in them. By creating more money this way, inflation of prices began because their money was not worth as much as it once was. The other way was to raise taxes.

Farmers who stayed on their small farms, were now selling less food and receiving money that was not enough to buy as much as it once did. Also, they still had to pay taxes. Slaves did not have to pay taxes, so some of these farmers that still lived in the lands away from Rome enslaved themselves to the large land owners who provided protection, a place to live, and food in exchange for their work, and thus the feudal system of medieval Europe began. The slaves, known as serfs in the feudal system, pledged themselves to the heads, or Lords, of the large manor. They could live and work the land around what became a castle (and were allowed inside the walls in times of war), and in return gave a portion of their harvest and time (to build or repair the Lord’s manor such as he roads, walls, etc.) Eventually nations emerged from this feudal system such as France and Spain, with Latin, the language of Rome, remaining as a major influence, known as the Romance languages.

The one institution left in Rome that was strong enough to maintain its authority past the fall of the western Roman empire was the Christian church under the authority of the Bishop of Rome, also known as the Pope. Later known as Roman Catholicism, the Church was able to preserve aspects of the Roman culture, including Latin.
Although many would take the fall of the city of Rome as the end of the empire, the emperors in the east did not. They continued to refer to the empire as the Roman empire and themselves as emperors of Rome. With Constantinople in the east, and no longer having the Latin influence of the west, the Greek culture became its primary influence.

2.4 Roman Revival--Justinian

The last Byzantine emperor to speak Latin was perhaps its greatest, Justinian. Beginning his reign in 527, Justinian retook North Africa from a tribe known as the Vandals. However the biggest prize was when he regained the Italian Peninsula including the city of Rome. Once again, the lands around the Mediterranean world were in the hands of the empire.

Justinian was helped in rule by his wife Theodora. She convinced him to allow women to own land. During the Nike revolt, led by fans of competing teams in the chariot races, as Justinian was planning on fleeing Constantinople, it was Theodora who’s refusal to do likewise that led to a change of mind on Justinian’s part and defeat of the rebels.

Many architectural achievements were also built in Constantinople during his reign. The most famous of these was the Hagia Sophia. Built on the site of a large church that was destroyed during the Nike riots, it was the most impressive church of its time. It included two smaller domes and one large dome over the center. A loft was built overlooking the sanctuary so Theodora could overlook the religious ceremonies below.
Another achievement of Justinian’s reign was his giving an orderly structure, or codifying, Roman laws. Known as Justinian’s Code, it was a major event in jurisprudence in the western world as his law book was not only passed down from generation to generation, but eventually spread throughout Europe as well.

The military victories and building projects did not come without a price. Justinian drained the treasury of its money and went into debt. This would affect Constantinople for many years to come. Not too long after Justiniaain’s death, the Byzantine Empire again lost control of the city of Rome.

2.5 Splitting & Reuniting--The Great Schism & the Crusades

About 500 years later, attacks by Slavic tribes on the Balkan Peninsula, Germanic tribes in the west, and Muslim Arab and Turk empires in the Middle East and North Africa decreased the size of the Byzantine empire. Of the three, the empires they needed to fear the most were the Muslim forces. By 1098, the emperor Alexius was feeling pressure from the Seljuq Turks. The Turks had seized control of most of the area of Asia Minor (Turkey) due to their victory at the Battle of Manzikert (1071). In that battle, the Byzantine emperor was captured thanks in part to the retreat of one section of the army that was supposed to protect the rear. The Byzantine defeat led to a series of civil wars within the empire and it also took away land that Constantinople depended upon for food. Out of these civil wars came a new emperor, Alexius Commenus, who in order to solidify his claim to the throne, married a member of the Ducas family, who had previously held the throne.

The Turks, now in control of most of what lay east of Constantinople, blocked access for Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Not only did this anger Christians because it prevented them from visiting holy shrines. Along with the loss of land in the Middle East to Muslim Arab and now Seljuk Turkish forces, Byzantium was being hurt financially. Alexis turned to fellow Christians in the former western part of the Roman empire to supply men to fight the Muslim forces.

Calling out to the Christian kings and princes in the west to fight in a holy war with the Byzantine Empire in the east was made more difficult by what happened in 1054. There had been disputes between the churches western Christianity and eastern Christianity. One of the major disagreements was on leadership. In the west, the Bishop of Rome, or Pope, was seen as the head of all Christianity, and was empowered to make decisions for all Christians.
In the east, the Bishops, including the one in Constantinople, or Patriarch, believed that although the Pope was the “first among equals” that religious decisions for Christianity should be done through church councils of all the leadership. With a Christian emperor in town, the Patriarch of Constantinople did not have the same power as the Pope, who had gained a lot of power after the fall of Rome. The Patriarch needed to make decisions with the approval of the emperor.

The issue of leadership as well as other issues finally led to a splitting of the Christian church into two in 1054. This was known as the Great Schism. The western churches under the authority of the Pope became known as the Roman Catholic Church while the eastern churches became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Alexius did appeal to his fellow Christians in the west for help, and in 1091, Pope Urban II called on the kings and princes who followed Roman Catholicism to help the Byzantium empire in driving out the Muslims from Jerusalem. The series of wars that followed over the next few centuries were known as the Crusades. The most tragic of the crusades for Byzantium was the Fourth Crusade of 1204. Forces from western Europe attacked Constantinople. They killed citizens, destroyed buildings, and looted from the cities wealth and placed their own emperor on the throne. Four large bronze horses were taken in the raid and hauled backed to Venice in Italy, where they still stand today. At first the Pope was angered by the mob, but then turned the other way as they brought Byzantium back under the religious authority of the Pope. The coerced reunification did not last long and only served to increase the divide between the two branches of Christianity.
2.6 The Real End--The Fall of Constantinople

The city of Constantinople never fully recovered from that attacks by the Christian forces of western Europe in the Fourth Crusade. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks, who came from the steppes region of Central Asia, under Mehmed II had taken over the Middle East, the Balkan Peninsula, and most of Anatolia, isolating the Byzantine empire to the city of Constantinople. Forces numbering about 300,000 attacked the three walled city. The 7000 or so defenders fought valiantly, but after about two months the final wall was breached, the emperor deposed, and the Roman empire was vanquished. Mehmed II then declared himself Kaiser al Rum, Emperor of the Romans.

The fall of the Byzantine Empire effected Europe in many ways. One is that many scholars fled the Ottomans and made their ways to Western Europe, carrying books and knowledge of the pre-Christian Roman and Greek eras. The influx helped to spark the era in Western Europe known as the Renaissance.

Another effect was on Russia, who had finished shaking off Mongol rule. They took the mantle of defender of the Orthodox Christian Church and their ruler, Ivan III, married the daughter of an heir to the Byzantine throne, helping his claim that he was the “Czar” the head of the “Third Rome”. And to make his point, he borrowed the Roman seal of the two headed eagle for his own.