



## THE BYZANTINE MIDDLE EAST

[Frederick Lauritzen](#)

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*Floor mosaic, Imperial Palace, Constantinople [Istanbul] 6th century*

Constantinople is a major key to understand the Middle East. It was the capital of many Middle Eastern countries for longer than any other power in the last three millennia.

Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Gaza came under Roman (later Byzantine) control with the end of Pompey's war on piracy in 63 BC. They remained Byzantine until 638 AD. That is a total of 701 years. The Ottoman empire took over many of these areas in 1517 and kept them until the end of World War I, a little more than 400 years. In both these periods the capital was Constantinople (Konstantiye in Turkish until 1928, today Istanbul). That is over one thousand years in which Constantinople was the political centre.

The Byzantine presence in the Middle East developed and defined religion in the area. The great historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, disapproved and called it the 'age of superstition'. He saw it begin after the time of Marcus Aurelius (the second century stoic emperor admired by the Enlightenment) and condemned the developments from the time of the emperor Diocletian (284-305).



The latter's successor, Constantine (306-337), placed Christianity on the map and defined a new relationship between religion and politics which is central to the Middle East to this day.

The 'age of superstition' is that which gave us some of the greatest Platonists: Plotinus (3rd century Egypt), Porphyry (3rd century Lebanon), Iamblichus (4th century Lebanon/Syria), Damascius (6th century Syria). All of them wrote in Greek, the language of culture of the Byzantine Empire and its capital Constantinople. Without their influence many Renaissance and Romantic European ideas would not have existed.

North Africa was also ruled from Rome first and Constantinople later, longer than from anywhere else. Egypt became Roman with the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC and remained so until 640 AD. That is almost 700 years. It maintained the same rule of law and governance for that period. It is the most significant period of legal and constitutional continuity for Egypt since pharaonic times. Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were directly ruled from Rome and later Constantinople from the time of Caesar (49-44 BC) until 697 (Tunisia) and part of Morocco until 711. The final moment of Byzantine North Africa was the Arab conquest of Gibraltar then defended and lost by an almost legendary Byzantine governor called Count Julian of Ceuta.

The Byzantines were mostly Christian. All Christian denominations present in the Middle East come from this Roman and Byzantine Era (49 BC-638 AD). The two exceptions are Catholics and Protestants. They were both imported from the West. The former appeared during the Crusades (1095-1291), and the latter during the Ottoman Turkish period (1517-1918). The Codex of Roman Law published in Constantinople in 529 AD protected the Jewish communities in the Middle East (Codex Justinianus 1.9.14pr.). Many minorities survived persecution by moving within Byzantine borders. One may think of the Syrian Alawites who settled around Byzantine Latakia (Laodicea) in Syria in the eleventh century.

One of the oldest inscriptions in the Arabic language, the Zabad inscription, was found in Syria and dates from 512 when the area was ruled by Constantinople. The inscription commemorates the Christian Saint Sergius.

The first Muslim conquests were all of what were then Byzantine territories. The Quran itself is a witness of this connection: the Surat ar-Rumi is a chapter of the Quran whose



name derives from the term Rum, the Arabic for Byzantine. The Quran's criticism of monastic communities (verse 27 of Surah al-Hadid) reflects a critique of Byzantine religious practice and monastic wealth and landownership.

The connection between the Byzantine and Arabic cultures is apparent in the Arabic term *فلسفة* (*falsafa*) which means to philosophize and is derived from Greek (*φιλόσοφος* '*philosophos*' means lover of wisdom). The Greek books the Arabs studied and commented on were from ancient Greeks but the speakers they encountered and who introduced and explained them were Byzantines.

This spirit of exchange and collaboration changed with the Turkish conquest of Jerusalem in 1071 which altered the balance of power and led to the crusades being called. Jerusalem had been Muslim ruled from 638 to 1071 without any crusade from the West.

From the 12th century Latins and Turks were the new defining powers in the Middle East. They have overshadowed the underlying Byzantine layer which is still there and is the one most analysts are eager to neglect.

It is almost impossible to attempt to explain the Middle East without Constantinople.

