Fall of The Roman Empire...in the 15th Century: Crash Course World History #12

Crash Course: World History
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=====Intro (0:00)=====

John: Hi there, my name's John Green, this is CrashCourse World History and today we're gonna talk about the fall of Rome.

Past John: Mr Green, Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Who's that pretty lady?

Present John: That "lady," me-from-the-past, is Emperor Justinian. We'll get to him in a minute.

(Intro plays)

How and when Rome fell remains the subject of considerable historical debate — but today I'm going to argue that the Rome didn't really fall until the middle of the 15th century.

But first, let me introduce you to the traditional view: Barbarians at the Gates. My, don't you look traditional? If you want to be really technical about it, the city of Rome was conquered by bar-bar-bar-barbarians in 476 CE. There was a last Roman Emperor Romulus Augustus, who ruled the empire for less than a year before being deposed and sent into exile by Odoacer, who was some kind of barbarian- we don't know for sure. Ostrogoth, Hun, Visigoth, Vandals; they all looked the same to the Romans. Rome had been sacked by barbarians before, most notably by Alaric the Visigoth in 410- Is it Uh-lar-ick or Uh-lair-ick? The dictionary says Uh-lair-ick but The Vampire Diaries say Uh-lar-ick so I'm going to go with Uh-lar-ick.

But anyway, after 476, there was never again a "Roman" emperor in Rome. Then there's the hipper anti-imperialistic argument — that's nice, but if you really want to go full hipster you should probably deny that you're being hipster-- right, exactly — which goes like this: Rome was doomed to fall as soon as it spread outside of Italy because the further the territory is from the capital, the harder it is to govern. Thus imperialism itself sowed the seeds of destruction in Rome. This was the argument put forth by the Roman historian Tacitus, although he put it in the mouth of a British chieftain. That sounded dirty, but it's not, it's all about context here on Crash Course. "To robbery, slaughter, plunder, they give the lying name of empire; they make a desert and call it peace."

There are two ways to overcome this governance problem: First, you rule with the proverbial topaz fist — that's not the proverb? Really, Stan? It's an iron fist? But topaz is much harder than iron. Don't these people know their Mohs scale of mineral hardness? Regardless, the Romans couldn't do this because their whole identity was wrapped up in an idea of justice that precluded indiscriminate violence.

The other strategy is to try to incorporate conquered people into the empire more fully: in Rome's case, to make them Romans. This worked really well in the early days of the Roman Republic and even at the beginning of the Empire, but it eventually led to barbarians inside the gates. The decline of the Roman legions started long before Rome started getting sacked. It really began with the extremely bad decision to incorporate Germanic warriors into the Roman Army.

Rome had a long history of absorbing people from the empire's fringes into the polity, first by making them allies and then eventually by granting them full citizenship rights. But usually these foreign citizens had developed ties to Rome itself; they learned Latin, they bought into the whole idea of the aristocratic republic. But by the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, though, the empire had been forced to allow the kind of riffraff into their army who didn't really care about the idea of Rome itself. They were only loyal to their commanders. And as you no doubt remember from the historical examples of Caesar, Pompey, Marius, contemporary Afghanistan... this is not a recipe for domestic bliss.

So here is Rome, stuck with a bunch of expensive and bloody wars against Germanic peoples who were really good at fighting and then they had a great idea: Why not fight with these guys? So they essentially hired them and soon the Roman Legions were teeming with these mercenaries who were loyal mostly to gold, secondarily to their commanders, and not at all to Rome which is a place that very few of them ever even saw. I mean, why would they give a crap about the health and well-being of the Roman Empire? Am I allowed to say crap, Stan? [ding ding ding] Nice.

This was of course a recipe for civil war, and that's exactly what happened with general after general after general declaring himself Emperor of Rome. So there was very little stability in the West. For instance, between 235 and 284 CE, 41 different people were either emperor or claimed to be emperor. And after the year 200, many of the generals who were powerful enough to proclaim themselves emperors weren't even Roman. In fact, a lot of them didn't speak much Latin. Oddly enough, one of the best symbols of the new face of the Roman Empire was sartorial. Instead of the traditional tunic and toga of the glory days of the Senate, most of the new general-emperors adopted that most practical and most barbaric of garments: pants. Oh, which reminds me, it's time for the Open Letter.

=====Open Letter (4:12)=====

An Open Letter to Pants.

But first, let's see what's in the Secret Compartment.Oh look, it's Rosie the Riveter. And she's wearing pants!

Dear Pants,
Although you eventually became a symbol of patriarchal oppression, in your early days you were worn by both men and women. And in the days of the Roman Republic, they hated you. They thought you barbarous. They thought that people wearing you was the definition of people lacking civilization. They ventured north and the wind blew up through their togas and lo and behold, they adopted pants. And there's a history lesson in that, pants, which is that when people have to choose between civilization and warm genitals, they choose warm genitals.

Best wishes,
John Green

=====The East and West Roman Empires (4:57)=====

And now a note from our sponsor: Today's episode of crash course is brought to you by the all-new Oldsmobile Byzantium, mixing power and luxury in a way that's ne- Really? Oldsmobile isn't a company anymore? And Byzantium is a place? Are you sure?

So remember when I said the Roman Empire survived 'til the 15th century? Well that was the Eastern Roman Empire, commonly known as the Byzantine Empire (although not by the people who lived in it who identified themselves as Romans). So while the Western Roman Empire descended into chaos, the eastern half of the Empire had its capital in Byzantium, a city on the Bosporus Strait that Constantine would later rename Constantinople, thereby paving the way for They Might Be Giants only mainstream hit.

Constantine moved his headquarters, and thereby the headquarters of the Roman Empire to Constantinople in 324 C.E. Constantine had lots of reasons to move his capitol east. For one thing he was

born in modern-day Croatia. Also he probably spoke better Greek than Latin, and plus the eastern provinces were a lot richer than the Western provinces and from a looting perspective, you just want to be closer to where the good warring is. The enemies in the East, like the Persian Parthians and the Persian Sassanians, were real empires, not just bands of warriors. And no matter who you were in world history, if you wanted to make a name for yourself in terms of war, you really needed to be up against the Persians. EVEN IF you were — the Mongols. Not this time, friends. [Mongoltage]

As the political center of the Roman Empire shifted east, Constantine also tried to re-orient his new religion, Christianity, toward the east, holding the first Church council in Nicaea in 325. The idea was to get all Christians to believe the same thing- that worked- but it did mark the beginning of the emperor having greater control over the Church. That trend would of course later lead to tensions between the church centered at Constantinople and the one centered in Rome. But, more on that in a bit.

To give you a sense of how dramatic this shift was, by the 4th century CE, Constantinople's population had soared while Rome's had gone from 500,000 to 80,000. And although the Byzantines spoke Greek not Latin, they considered themselves Romans and if they did then we probably should too. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble (6:57)=====

There was a lot of continuity between the old, Western Roman Empire, and the new, Eastern one. Politically, each was ruled by a single man (sometimes there were two, and once there were four– but let's forget about that for now) who wielded absolute military power. War was pretty much constant as the Byzantines fought the Persian Sassanian Empire and then various Islamic empires.

Trade and valuable agricultural land that yielded high taxes meant that the Byzantine Empire was, like the Western Roman Empire, exceptionally rich, and it was slightly more compact as a territory than its predecessor and much more urban, containing as it did all of those once independent Greek city states, which made it easier to administer.

Also like their Western counterparts, the Byzantines enjoyed spectacle and sport. Chariot races in Constantinople were huge, with thousands turning out at the Hippodrome to cheer on their favorites. Big bets were placed and there was a huge rivalry, not just about sports, but also about political affiliations between the two main teams, the Blues and the Greens- Thanks for putting us on the Greens, Thought Bubble. That rivalry was so heated that riots often broke out between them. In one such riot, an estimated 30,000 people were killed. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====Justinian (8:02)=====

But perhaps the most consistently Roman aspect of Byzantine society was that they followed Roman law. The Romans always prided themselves on being ruled by laws, not by men, and even though wasn't actually the case after the second century BCE, there's no question that the Eastern Roman Empire's codification of Roman laws was one of it's greatest achievements. And much of the credit for that goes to the most famous Byzantine Emperor, at least after Constantine, Justinian. I like your brooch, sir.

In 533 Justinian published the Digest, an 800,000-word condensation of 1,528 Latin law books. And to go along with this he published the Institutes, which was like a curriculum for the Roman law schools that existed all through the Empire.

Justinian, incidentally, was by far the most awesome of the Byzantine emperors. He was like the David Tennant of Doctors. He was born a peasant somewhere in the Balkans and then rose to become emperor in 527. He ruled for almost 30 years and in addition to codifying Roman law, he did a lot to restore the former glory of the Roman Empire. He took Carthage back, he even took Rome back from the Goths, although not for long. And he's responsible for the building of one of the great churches of all of time — which is now a mosque — the Hagia Sophia or Church of Saint Wisdom.

So after one of those sporting riots destroyed the previous church, he built this, which with its soaring domes became a symbol for the wealth and opulence of his empire. The Romans were remarkable builders and engineers and the Hagia Sophia is no exception: a dome its equal wouldn't be build for another 500 years.

But you would never mistake it for a Roman temple; it doesn't have the austerity or the emphasis on engineering that you see in, for instance, the Coliseum. And this building in many ways functions a symbol for the ways the Eastern Roman Empire was both Roman and not.

But maybe the most interesting thing Justinian ever did was be married to his controversial Theater Person of a wife, Theodora. Hey Danica, can we get Theodora up here? Wow that is perfect. It's funny how married couples always look like each other. Theodora began her career as an actress, dancer, and possible prostitute before becoming Empress. And she may have saved her husband's rule by convincing him not to flee the city during riots between the Blues and Greens. She also mentored a eunuch who went on to become a hugely important general — Mentoring a eunuch sounds like a euphemism, but it's not. And she fought to expand the rights of women in divorce and property ownership, and even had a law passed taking the bold stance that adulterous women should not be executed.

So, in short, the Byzantines continued the Roman legacy of empire and war and law for almost 1000 years after Romulus Augustus was driven out of Rome. The Byzantines may not have spoken Latin, and few of their emperors came from Rome, but in most important ways they were Romans.

=====So what made them different? (10:38)=====

Except one REALLY IMPORTANT way. The Byzantines followed a different form of Christianity, the branch we now call Eastern or sometimes Greek Orthodox. How there came to be a split between the Catholic and Orthodox traditions is complicated – you might even call it Byzantine. What matters for us are the differences between the churches, the main doctrinal one being about the dating of Easter, and the main political one being about who rules whom. Did I get my whom right there, Stan? YES!

In the West there was a Pope and in the East there was a Patriarch. The Pope is the head of the Roman Catholic Church. He sort of serves as God's regent on Earth and he doesn't answer to any secular ruler. And ever since the fall of Rome, there has been a lot of tension in Western Europe between Popes and kings over who should have the real power. But in the Orthodox church they didn't have that problem because the Patriarch was always appointed by the Emperor. So it was pretty clear who had control over the church, so much that they even have a word for it- caesaropapism: Caesar over Pope. But the fact that in Rome there was no emperor after 476 meant there was no one to challenge the Pope, which would profoundly shape European history over the next, like, 1200

years.

So I would argue that in some important ways, the Roman Empire survived for a thousand years after it left Rome, but in some ways it still survives today. It survives in our imagination when we think of this as east and this as west, it survives in football rivalries that have their roots in religious conflicts, and it survives in the Justinian law code which continues to be the basis for much of civil law in Europe.

Next week we'll talk about the emergence of Islam over here... How'd I do, Stan? Well, you can't win 'em all. Thanks for watching.

=====Credits (12:05)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's Phrase of the Week was “Aristotelian logic”. You can guess this week’s Phrase of the Week or suggest new ones in Comments, where you can also ask questions that our team of historians will endeavor to answer. Thanks for watching. And as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.