



A Short History of Byzantium

John Julius Norwich

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"Norwich is always on the lookout for the small but revealing details. . . . All of this he recounts in a style that consistently entertains."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

In this magisterial adaptation of his epic three-volume history of Byzantium, John Julius Norwich chronicles the world's longest-lived Christian empire. Beginning with Constantine the Great, who in a.d. 330 made Christianity the religion of his realm and then transferred its capital to the city that would bear his name, Norwich follows the course of eleven centuries of Byzantine statecraft and warfare, politics and theology, manners and art.

In the pages of **A Short History of Byzantium** we encounter mystics and philosophers, eunuchs and barbarians, and rulers of fantastic erudition, piety, and degeneracy. We enter the life of an empire that could create some of the world's most transcendent religious art and then destroy it in the convulsions of fanaticism. Stylishly written and overflowing with drama, pathos, and wit, here is a matchless account of a lost civilization and its magnificent cultural legacy.

"Strange and fascinating . . . filled with drollery and horror."

--*Boston Globe*

A Short History of Byzantium Details

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From Reader Review A Short History of Byzantium for online ebook

4triplezed says

Knowing nothing of the Byzantium Empire this must be as good as it gets for a short history. My only complaint was that the authors opinions as to the individuals was a touch too prominent for me and the lack of footnotes is also a small complaint. I suspect I will never read another book that has so many eyes "put out" Brutal!

Tyler says

This 384-page condensation of the original three-volume history gives readers a complete introduction to the direct descendent of the Roman Empire.

The book relates fascinating incidents about the main people, including an eyebrow-raising commentary on Empress Theodora's early sex life, salaciously recounted by the contemporary historian Procopius. The book explains the famous differences over Church dogma, which characterize the Byzantines for us today, and which eventually drew even me into the fray: As I read along I found myself siding with the Iconoclasts and abhorring Norwich's favoritism toward the icons. How strong Byzantium's mystique is, to cause people even now to take sides in its maddening disputes! The book provides a useful index, several maps at the front and an intricate imperial genealogy for those who dare.

The author is at fault in a couple of places. The photographs, set off in three sections, are black-and-white while their subjects, including Byzantine art, scream for color. The text itself runs through the empire's 1100-year history and 88 emperors with an even tone that leaves readers unsure as to which events were decisive and which incidental to Byzantium's fate. We learn that there were great thinkers in the empire, but not what they thought. In fact, the only real glimpse we get of who the Byzantines were and what they were made of comes at the end of the book, during the amazing last day of their existence. The author drops the ball again in his epilogue, which really should have explored Byzantium's legacy much more than it does in its one thin page.

The history of this empire is interesting enough in its own right to hold one's attention, and Norwich does an adequate job with the material he uses. By no means is this a tedious account. It just doesn't tell us quite what it could. Even in this abridged version, *A Short History of Byzantium* could have been a bit more engaging than it is.

Eric says

"If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end..." Sebald was talking about flying over densely settled areas, but to read the compressed chronicle of a thousand year empire is also to view our species from a great height, and the experience offers just as frightening a vantage. From the heights of historical survey, from the distance of many centuries, the professed, the "higher" motivations and justifications barely reach our ears

(“Christendom” as a united bloc of believers seems a fantasy; or a joke, an easy irony; as “democracy” will one day be); and all we can see are the compulsive collisions of states; the borders receding, the borders advancing; the cities built up by one generation, and torn down by the next; the usurpers and regicides ascending supposedly sacred thrones (each Byzantine emperor was acclaimed “equal to the Apostles”); the political entities in their periods of strength exploiting and devouring, in their periods of weakness exploited and devoured by others; the universal wolf. (Sir Philip Sidney said a great conqueror is but the momentary “cock of this world’s dunghill.”) Just as we fly over cities knowing that human beings are guiding those toy cars and emitting that industrial smoke, so also do we scan each war-filled page knowing that thousands of people, way, way down there – slightly clouded over by “battle was joined” or “the looting lasted three days” – are being raped and robbed and murdered; or are raping and robbing and murdering. And that last ditch narrative, that of “Decadence,” the story we Band-Aid over our confusion, doesn’t clarify our situation – doesn’t point a direction or describe a momentum. Norwich’s remark that the pivotal catastrophe of Byzantium, defeat by the Seljuk Turks at Manzikert in 1071, occurred *three centuries* before the Emperor became a vassal of a *different* Turkic state, the Ottomans (by which time the Seljuk order had been shattered in its turn by Tamburlaine’s Mongols), and *four centuries* before the Empire finally, cinematically “fell” (Constantine XI, last emperor and namesake of the millennium-distant founder, when he saw the Turks had breached Constantinople’s land walls cast off his purple robes and led a last desperate charge, his body never to be identified or recovered*), made me pull down my copy of Richard Gilman’s *Decadence: The Strange Life of a Epithet*, in which I saw that I had once underlined this:

One begins to suspect that whatever “decadence” may be it plays a scapegoat role as a word, an ascription. And it serves, it seems, to cover up our ignorance of, or refusal to see, how the world operates in one of its deepest dimensions independently of what we call cause and effect... History is not a chronicle of discrete events or epochs, nor is it to be understood in categorical ways. Everything connects. The reason “decadence” will not do as a description of Rome is that it does injustice to both her past and her future; she did not wind down, she did not disappear, nor did she bring down upon herself her own fate. Fate was there, and fate is another word for change.

* He was long thought to slumber in a cave, awaiting the hour when he would reconquer Constantinople/Istanbul for Christianity. What is it with Eastern Orthodoxy and agelessly slumbering heroes? The 18th century Russian field marshal and scourge of the Ottomans Aleksandr Suvorov was also believed to sleep deeply within a mountain, to awake in the Motherland's hour of greatest peril. This belief was so durable and widespread that during WWII Red Army soldiers were propagandistically conflated with Suvorov's shade:

<http://www.ganesha.org/hall/suvorov1.jpg>

Matt says

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 ended what the population always identified as the Roman Empire, but

has become known as the Byzantine Empire that John Julius Norwich thought had been given a bad reputation in “the West”. In “A Short History of Byzantium” Norwich condensed his three-volume history of the Greek-flavored Roman Empire into a general history for those interested in history but do not have time for lengthy studies.

In covering almost 1200 years of history in about 400 pages, Norwich had to trim to the barebones of Byzantine history with only tidbits of detail that whet the appetite to want to know more for those interested. While frustration as it might be for those who want more than a “general history”, for those looking for just a straight-forward informative history this book is concise and lively written to keep you from falling asleep.

For those wondering if they should read Norwich’s three-volume history of Byzantium then this book will let you know the author’s writing style as well as make you want to purchase the multi-volume series. For those looking only for a concise history of a nearly 1200 year old empire this is a book for you.

Czarny Pies says

This is a truly ghastly book by an historian who has written several outstanding works. I wish now that I had stopped at the introduction in which the author explains that his "Short History" is an abridged version of his trilogy on the history of Byzantium. Abridgments of this sort are typically lifeless as indeed this one is. A bare bones narrative exists but the passages that provided narrative flow and spirit are gone. Norwich's 900 page narrative of the 200 year history of the Normans Kingdom in Italy zips along. The Short History of Byzantium which takes 380 pages to cover 1100 years gets bogged down in a meaningless string of names and events that seem to take forever to read. When Norwich writes at the length that he is comfortable with, he produces full fleshed characters and dynamic narratives. When he cut to make this book, the result was a senseless list of events.

What Norwich actually says about Byzantium actually makes sense. He argues that Byzantium (a.k.a.) in its very long existence enjoyed many great moments, and that its history should not be presented as a single long decline as Gibbon did. In Norwich's view Byzantium was very stable from the fourth to the eleventh centuries. Then three factors caused it to go into decline. First, the conquests by Islamic dynasties greatly undermined Byzantium's political power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Second, the Crusaders caused great damage whenever they crossed Byzantium on their way to the Holy Land. The sacking of Constantinople in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade had a particularly devastating impact of the fortunes of Byzantium. Finally, the rise of Venice caused Byzantium to lose its position as the dominant trading power in the region. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks finally conquered Byzantium which had many afflictions at the end but which had also had seven centuries of true glory.

In his introduction, Norwich being if nothing else honest, explains that he did not read any of the original histories in Greek as they were available in English translation. This of course begs the question: should the reader simply not read the same classical histories instead of Norwich's book. Most professors teaching undergraduate courses on Byzantium (a.k.a. the late Roman Empire) make their students read "The Secret History" by Procopius and the Chronicles of the Crusades by Geoffrey Villehardouin and Jean de Joinville). My own feeling that both of these works would be more worthwhile for the general reader interested in Byzantium than Norwich's "Short History of Byzantium."

Ashley Nef says

Constantinople fell today 563 years ago. Kind of poetic I finished the story of its 1000 year history today as well (this was totally unplanned). I just love Byzantium - its history is even crazier than Game of Thrones, and the setting is the stuff of dreams: gold mosaics, enamel pieces, rich silks, scintillating jewels, massive defensive walls designed by angels, nigh on mythic emperors and emperesses, and the Hagia Sophia rising above the city skyline above the Bosphorus. Gotta love John Julius Norwich! He spins a good story that captured my imagination. I can't wait to visit Istanbul one day.

Hana says

I ought to check my home library top shelves more often (or at least dust them from time to time). There, seated appropriately but shyly between From Pagan Rome to Byzantium and Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II was this treasure, bought several years ago in advance of a long trip to Turkey.

But then I was distracted by the more proximate history of the Ottomans. This time around, my interest in Byzantium, as well as its antecedents, neighbors and many descendants, is deeper, more informed and hopefully more lasting. The only (and eternal) question is....which of the three books do I read first?

Suzannah says

This is an *incredible*, epic, history. I knew very little about the Eastern Roman Empire when I decided to read it, and consequently this book was rather like drinking from a firehose. 1100 years of some of the most staggering and implausible history you've ever read condensed into 383 pages, finishing off with a heroic last stand and the legends it inspired.

I don't mean this to be the end of my acquaintance with Byzantium, but it was an electrifying introduction.

GoldGato says

Hey now, this was one long "short" history. 431 pages of murder, usurpation, blinding (lots of blinding), mutilation, and just plain history. I'm exhausted. I also couldn't stop reading.

Being thoroughly confused about the Eastern Roman Empire and wanting to learn more about the great Justinian, I added this volume to my collection with the view that I would just leaf through for a bit and then put it in the queue for a future reading. Wrong! I became enslaved to every new emperor and shook my head at the sacking of Constantinople by the whacked-out western Crusaders. I wanted to be there when the Byzantine Empire was at its height, before sloth and the good life weakened future rulers.

I've stayed away from John Julius Norwich because one of his books entrapped me in a library once and I didn't want that to happen again. But he is splendid at writing history and illuminating lost civilizations. Beginning with Constantine the Great, Norwich takes the reader through a rollercoaster of an empire, one

that just didn't seem to realize its time would eventually come to an end. The Roman Empire didn't stop with the fall of Rome, but the eastern portion certainly took a different path. If you want to learn more about the Byzantines, without reading the original three volumes by Norwich, then this is certainly an excellent way to get it done.

"One of the extraordinary phenomena in all history is the way suddenly, from one moment to the next, one city or small country is touched by the angel's wing. And then just as suddenly, it's gone."

Book Season = Spring (no delusions, no mercy)

Jared says

norwich is like the batty old art history professor you had in college who seemed more interested in the scandalous stories behind the scenes of each moment in history than the traditional information that fills the usual history texts. he tells the history of byzantium in such a fun and lightning-paced way. its like a circus soap opera riding through history on a speeding roller coaster. its great fun reading about all the intrigue, scandal and destruction throughout the empire, and norwich revels in every minute of it. you can almost hear him snickering along at certain points of absurdity. if you want a dry recollection of historical dates then this isn't for you. but if you want an almost hilarious telling of the specific individuals, scandals and stories of an underrated and often forgotten empire and its people then this is for you.

Ryan says

A Short History of Byzantium

John Julius Norwich

Read it in Hardcover at 431 pages including extensive Index, biblio, Maps, Lists, etc.

This is the third Norwich this year for me. While not a historian by trade he's managed to write some pretty fantastic history in both this and Kingdom of the Sun. A Short History of Byzantium is actually a trimmed up work from a previous publication. The original being a much more detailed account which I had a hard time finding (it was published in three volumes). Since this is my first work on Byzantium I wanted a pretty quick pace and Norwich does just this but in some instances it's kind of a whirlwind so this isn't the book for people looking for a more detailed record.

That's not to say it isn't extensive though because it is. Norwich uses 383 pages to cover over 1000 years of history. A lot happens. Some people and events get significantly more pages than others, the broader analysis of issues facing the empire are cut for a streamlined approach in which Norwich tries to focus on the most important things and motivations but has to cut an in-depth look on the Empires opponents. Somehow he still manages to paint a detailed picture. Byzantium itself is full of intrigue between the ruling families, their sunder with the West involving the Papacy and Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire as an eternal thorn, and later threatened by the rise of the Muslim Dynasties in the Levant and later Crusades. Byzantium's existence was a tight rope walk full of blinding's, castrations, banishments, battles, and assassinations. The Roman East still held onto all of the intrigue of Ancient Rome and it's absolutely fantastic reading.

I'd suggest this to anyone looking for an exciting historic whirlwind through the Byzantium Empire.

3.5 rounding up for Goodreads deficient 5-star system.

Hadrian says

All-encompassing history of an all too obscure subject.

Warwick says

This is history the way you always wished it could be but never is. It is a scarcely-believable catalogue of violent deaths (try being pierced at close range by hundreds of arrows until you bleed slowly to death), sexual intrigues (one Empress had specially-trained geese to peck corn from her nether regions), and religious oddities (men who live their whole lives on top of a column, for instance).

With barbarian hordes, crusading knights, treasures and quests, the whole thing is like Tolkien got together with David Lynch to invent something that you could never get away with if it were fiction.

There are times, especially near the beginning and end, where you can tell that this has been abridged from the three-volume edition (which doesn't seem to be easily available any more). But on the whole it's a very enjoyable and fascinating canter through a period of history which is still not well known, and which is the link from the classical world to the mediaeval world. Great fun.

Max says

Norwich compresses three volumes into one in his Short History covering the 1100 years and 88 emperors of Byzantium. As you turn the pages, the centuries roll by quickly. It soon becomes hard to remember exactly who did what to whom and when. Although some figures stand out such as Constantine I, Justinian I and Basil II. There is an upside to this compacted presentation. One gets a feel for the sweep of history. It is easier to see what changes and what stays the same over the centuries. Below are some notes on a few things that caught my attention.

First there was the extreme brutality practiced routinely by the Byzantines and every tribe or state they encountered. Poisoning, stabbing, hacking to death, raping, blinding, castrating, nose slitting, cutting out tongues and off ears, hands and feet were all just part of a day's work. Such measures were imposed on foreign enemies and competing family members alike. Second was the constant war and infighting. Palace intrigues and coups were constant. There was always a war underway or in preparation be it with the Goths, Vandals, Huns, Persians, Franks, Bulgars, Normans, Turks, Arabs, whoever. Of course these groups were also constantly engaged in infighting and wars with their neighbors. In violence at all levels there seemed to be little difference between any century or people.

Third were the unbelievably arcane religious disputes within Christianity that had significant geopolitical consequences. Particularly intense were the disputes over the nature of Jesus which created deep divisions and tensions. The predominant Christian view was adopted by the Council of Ephesus in 431. It held that Jesus was of one substance with the father and was Divine and human united in one individual existence (one being with a dual nature). Arianism was adopted by some Roman emperors and Goths, Vandals and

Lombards. It held that Jesus was created by the Father and subordinate to Him (in essence more human than God). Monophysitism was popular in the early Christian Middle Eastern churches. It held that Jesus had one nature, Divine (more God than human). Also popular in early Eastern Christian churches was Nestorianism which held that Jesus had two loosely united natures, human and Divine (essentially occupying two separate existences, one God and one human).

If heresy over the dual nature of Christ didn't make your blood boil (perhaps literally for those caught in the wrong place and time), then there was the equally unfathomable Filioque controversy which engendered intense animosity between Orthodox and Roman Christianity. The Latin Church believed as in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit processes from the Father and the Son. The Orthodox Church believed that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father. This dispute had important consequences since the Popes used this controversy to portray the Orthodox "schismatics" as evil as the infidels. Thus Western European states were often encouraged to not only deny Byzantium support against the Turks but to attack it for its heresy. When Byzantine emperors desperate for Western support tried to compromise by saying the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father through the Son, they were ostracized by both churches.

The Byzantine Empire was founded by Constantine the Great in 330. This Eastern Roman Empire would survive a thousand years past the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century. The last truly Roman Emperor of Byzantium was Justinian I in the in the sixth century. It was during Justinian's reign that the empire reached its greatest extent encompassing most of the Mediterranean coast, North Africa, Italy, the Balkans and the Arab Middle East. The last Emperor who ascribed to Roman traditions was Heraclius in the seventh century. Afterwards Greek titles would be used and the Greek language become official as it had been in the Eastern Church.

In the seventh century the rise of the Muslim world changed the usual mix of wars Byzantium fought with the Persians and the barbarian tribes (Goths, Vandals, Bulgars, Huns). The Muslims were soon laying siege to Constantinople. The author contends that "Had the Saracens captured Constantinople in the seventh century rather than the fifteenth, all Europe - and America - might be Muslim today." The Byzantine Empire was one of ceaseless power battles and cruelty. While the Byzantines had a much higher literacy rate than the barbarians, the savagery was equally distributed.

The Empire diminished following Justinian. The 8th century found it caught up in a passionate internal religious dispute that would last 100 years. Iconoclasm held that sacred images should not be allowed, similar to Islamic beliefs. As the movement gathered steam, a vast amount of fine Byzantine art was destroyed. Byzantium regained its mojo in the late ninth, tenth early eleventh century under the Macedonian Dynasties with Constantinople becoming the wealthiest city in Europe. The Empire reached its apogee under Basil II in the early eleventh century. From that point on it would decline. In 1054 the Eastern Orthodox and Western Roman Catholic churches permanently split, something that had been a long time in coming.

In 1203 Byzantium was sacked by the crusaders of the Fourth Crusade. The Crusade had started out as a Western Christian effort to recapture Jerusalem which had earlier fallen to Saladin. However the Doge of Venice, the eighty year old blind Enrico Dandolo, wanted to take down Byzantium. With the promise of the plunder of the richest city in the world he got the crusaders to forget Jerusalem much to the consternation of the Pope. Instead the crusading Franks and Germans joined the Venetians to conquer and ravage Constantinople. The mass murder, rape, pillaging and destruction devastated Byzantium. Permanently weakened it would never again be able to adequately defend itself and would ultimately fall to the Ottomans. Ironically men fighting under the cross did what the Saracens never could. Without a viable Byzantium the rest of Christendom was left vulnerable to Muslim attack.

The Latins ruled Constantinople for 57 years. The Greek Orthodox tradition was carried on in small states in Anatolia and the Adriatic Coast. The Mongols occupied the attention of the Bulgars and Turks while the Franks and Venetians in Constantinople grew weaker. Finally a deal with Genoa returned Constantinople to Orthodox leadership. But the theological split between the Western and Eastern Church had turned to one of bitter hate for what the Latins did to Constantinople, now a ruined city never to regain its splendor. Byzantium lingered on for two more centuries despite constant threats from its numerous enemies and devastating bouts of plague. By the time it fell in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks, it was a shell of its former self consisting only of Constantinople and an impoverished small populace.

I have mixed feelings about this book. As a learning experience it was time well spent. Norwich delivers an authoritative overview of Byzantium and lets us see Western Europe and the Middle East through the eyes of the Byzantines. I appreciated this different perspective. However a huge amount of history was condensed into just 400 pages. Trying to save time by selecting Norwich's abridged version I probably shortchanged myself. I suspect his full length history is much more enjoyable. For in the intervals where Norwich isn't just reciting facts, I can see he is an engaging writer. When my interest again returns to the Middle Ages I'll definitely check out the three volume set.

Tara says

Wow they sure did a lot of gouging out of eyes and tongues and noses and throwing people off cliffs! Everyone is all, hey this new emperor will be great I bet we won't have to murder him with poisoned mulberries or whack him with a soap dish or behead him. Then the poor little lamb takes power, has some good ideas, but reverts to insanity as quickly as he can and someone races to get the perennially-useful soapdish and cheerfully start anew. What years of glee! And when they weren't having those fun times they were running rampant through the streets beating each other up about obscure theological issues and hiding ikons under their cloaks and excommunicating one another. So, basically... I loved it.
