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Byzantium and Rome: Continuity and Change After 476

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Introduction

This book investigates what it meant for Rome to endure after 476. The deposition of Romulus Augustulus became a convenient marker for the “fall” of the Western Roman Empire, yet in the eastern Mediterranean the Roman state persisted, governing from Constantinople with institutions, laws, and ideals that traced their lineage to the classical past. Rather than narrate a simple decline, we examine a field of long-term processes—administrative recalibration, legal codification, artistic reimagining, and shifting identities—that together produced what later observers called Byzantium. Our central claim is that continuity and change were not opposites here but partners: the empire survived by transforming.

Four axes organize the analysis: administration, law, art, and identity. Through these we ask three linked questions in each chapter: Which Roman structures survived intact? Which adapted to new conditions? Which disappeared, and why? Administrative chapters follow the path from late imperial prefectures to regionalized systems of command and fiscal extraction, tracing how older frameworks were repurposed to meet pressures of warfare, plague, and shrinking revenue. Legal chapters explore how codification under Theodosius II and Justinian crafted a usable Roman past while guiding everyday practice in courts and contracts. Art-historical chapters examine the persistence of classical forms alongside new visual languages, including the turn to the domed basilica and the charged politics of icons. Identity-focused chapters probe the meanings of “Roman” in a multilingual, multiethnic empire that called itself Romaion even as outsiders coined “Byzantine.”

Our approach bridges political, social, and cultural history. We combine readings of normative texts—laws, edicts, theological treatises—with evidence from archaeology, sigillography, numismatics, and art. Urban excavations show how cities contracted, shifted their centers of gravity, and later revived; seals and coins reveal administrative structures and fiscal policies; buildings and images disclose evolving conceptions of power and sanctity. By juxtaposing these different kinds of evidence, we can see how an imperial rhetoric of continuity interacted with the realities of demographic change, environmental stress, and military transformation.

Periodization matters. Late antiquity is treated here not as an epilogue to classical Rome nor merely a preface to medieval Byzantium, but as a hinge that makes both legible. We therefore move beyond the year 476 to consider earlier foundations and later consequences: the fourth-century administrative reforms that set the stage for endurance; the sixth-century ambitions of Justinian and the limits they encountered; and the seventh- and eighth-century crises that forced innovations in army, tax, and provincial life. This wider chronological lens allows us to identify the mechanisms by

which institutions survive: through selective memory, practical adjustment, and the constant negotiation between center and periphery.

Throughout, we attend to the people who made continuity and change real: officials balancing imperial directives with local conditions; soldiers stationed on evolving frontiers; bishops, monks, and laity shaping a public Christianity; artisans and architects who translated doctrine and imperial ideology into stone, paint, and mosaic; merchants and tax collectors whose decisions recalibrated the economy; and speakers of Latin, Greek, and other languages who claimed, contested, or redefined Romanness. Their actions demonstrate how survival often meant reconfiguration rather than replication.

Finally, this study is written for students of long-term historical processes. It provides a framework for thinking about institutional survival beyond Byzantium: how states narrate their past to legitimate the present, how legal traditions are curated to remain authoritative, how visual cultures mediate power, and how collective identities persist while changing their content. By following Rome into Byzantium, we learn how empires endure not by standing still, but by turning inherited structures into tools fit for new worlds.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Problem of 476: Event, Aftermath, and Historical Myth

The year 476 has haunted the Western historical imagination for centuries, a neat chronological fence separating the classical world from the medieval one. Yet for those who lived through it, the deposition of the last western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was not a world-ending catastrophe but rather one more twist in a long, messy story of imperial fragmentation. The boy-emperor's removal by the Germanic general Odoacer was brisk and bloodless, and many contemporaries barely noted it. The Senate in Rome even sent a congratulatory embassy to Constantinople, suggesting that the eastern emperor Zeno might now rule a unified empire. From their perspective, the west had not fallen; it had merely been tidied up.

For the east, the events of 476 represented a problem of protocol, not a collapse of civilization. Zeno faced a delicate choice: recognize Odoacer as a Roman patrician, thereby keeping the west within the imperial system, or declare him a usurper and launch an expensive, risky war. He chose pragmatism, granting Odoacer the title of patrician in exchange for nominal loyalty. This arrangement maintained the legal fiction that the empire remained one and indivisible, even as local realities diverged. Constantinople continued to claim jurisdiction over Italy, even if its actual control was minimal. The empire's center of gravity had already shifted eastward decades before 476, making the loss of western territories less a dramatic rupture than a confirmation of an existing trend.

The myth of 476 as a hard dividing line grew gradually, nurtured by later historians who needed a clear moment to mark Rome's "fall." Edward Gibbon's eighteenth-century narrative famously cemented this idea, but earlier writers like Bede and later Renaissance scholars had already woven 476 into their chronologies. These writers projected their own anxieties about decline and decadence onto the past, constructing a moral tale about the consequences of losing civic virtue. What they presented as a sudden collapse was, in reality, a slow unravelling that began long before Odoacer and continued long after. The year is a useful shorthand but not an explanation.

Before 476, the western empire had been convulsed by decades of political instability, military fragmentation, and economic contraction. Barbarian settlements had become de facto kingdoms, and Roman armies were increasingly composed of Germanic troops whose loyalty lay with their commanders rather than the imperial state. Theoderic's Ostrogoths had already established themselves in Pannonia, and other groups were carving out territories in Gaul, Spain, and North Africa. By the time Romulus Augustulus was deposed, the western court in Ravenna was a hollow shell, its

authority barely extending beyond the palace gates. Odoacer simply completed a process already well underway.

In the east, the empire remained robust, if not entirely healthy. Constantinople had become the wealthiest and best-defended city in the Mediterranean. Its armies were better paid and more reliable, its tax system more efficient, and its institutions more deeply entrenched. The eastern provinces—Anatolia, Syria, Egypt—were more urbanized and economically productive than most of the west. Zeno and his successors could draw on resources and administrative capacity that their western counterparts could only dream of. The east had been the empire's economic engine for generations, and it now became its political heartland as well.

Odoacer's regime in Italy sought legitimacy through Roman forms rather than rejecting them. He maintained the Senate, respected property rights, and continued to collect taxes, albeit at a lower level. His mint produced coins bearing imperial imagery, and his court employed Roman legal experts. Far from presenting himself as a conqueror, he styled himself as a restorer of order, a defender of Italian interests within an imperial framework. This reliance on Roman institutions shows how deeply embedded they were, even in a post-imperial landscape. The trappings of Rome persisted because they were practical, prestigious, and familiar.

Theoderic the Great's arrival in 493, with Zeno's tacit blessing, represented a continuation of this Roman-Germanic synthesis. Theoderic ruled Italy as a Roman patrician and ostrogothic king simultaneously, maintaining the Senate, appointing Roman officials like Cassiodorus, and commissioning Roman-style buildings. His coinage bore imperial portraits, and his legal edicts were framed as upholding Roman law. For many Italians, daily life changed little: taxes were collected, courts operated, and cities remained governed by local elites. Theoderic's success lay in balancing Germanic military control with Roman administrative continuity, a model that would be echoed by later rulers across Europe.

Administratively, the west had already lost much of its coherence before 476. The great prefectures and dioceses that structured late imperial rule had been eroded by constant warfare and the withdrawal of central authority. Local magnates and bishops stepped into the vacuum, managing defense and justice at a municipal level. Odoacer and later Theoderic did not reconstruct these vast structures but worked with what remained, relying on regional commanders and city councils. The imperial bureaucracy shrank dramatically, and what survived did so in a more localized, adaptive form. This was not a wholesale abandonment of Roman organization but a pragmatic scaling down.

Legally, the period after 476 remained deeply Roman. The Theodosian Code, compiled in 438, continued to be cited in Italian courts, and Roman law remained the foundation for property transactions and civil disputes. Theoderic's own edict, issued around 500,

explicitly drew on Roman legal traditions while incorporating Germanic customs where necessary. Roman jurisprudence was not erased by the change in political masters; it was selectively applied and preserved. This legal continuity provided a crucial framework for social order and elite identity, ensuring that Roman civic culture retained its authority even without an emperor in the west.

In the east, the legal codification project accelerated. Theodosius II's Code had already provided a comprehensive collection of imperial legislation, and later Justinian would undertake an even more ambitious revision. These projects were not merely administrative exercises but acts of ideological assertion, reaffirming the empire's Roman heritage and its commitment to ordered rule. Law was a language of continuity, linking the present regime to centuries of imperial precedent. By standardizing legal knowledge, the eastern state maintained a level of coherence that the west, lacking such sustained imperial patronage, could not match.

Economic patterns also reveal the asymmetry between east and west. The eastern Mediterranean remained integrated into long-distance trade networks, with Constantinople serving as a hub connecting the Black Sea, the Aegean, and the Levant. Tax revenues flowed reliably to the imperial treasury, supporting the army and public works. In contrast, western economies fragmented into more localized, agrarian systems. Coin hoards from the fifth century show a marked decline in the circulation of gold in the west, while eastern coinage remained abundant. The economic divergence was not immediate in 476 but was already pronounced, and it shaped the different trajectories of post-imperial states.

Military realities further underscored the difference. The eastern army, though increasingly reliant on Germanic mercenaries, remained a centralized, paid force loyal to the emperor. The western army had largely disintegrated into private bands under barbarian commanders. Odoacer himself rose through the ranks of such a force, and his power rested on the loyalty of his troops rather than imperial appointment. After 476, the east continued to maintain field armies and frontier defenses, while in the west military defense became the responsibility of local leaders and new Germanic kings. This shift redefined the relationship between state and violence, a transformation that would have lasting consequences for political authority.

Religion, too, played a role in shaping the aftermath. The east remained firmly within the Nicene Christian tradition, with the emperor acting as the protector of orthodoxy. In the west, the church increasingly filled institutional voids left by the retreating imperial administration. Bishops became civic leaders, managing welfare, justice, and even defense in some cities. The papacy in Rome began to assert its own authority, sometimes in tension with Constantinople. The growing religious divergence—both theological and institutional—would eventually contribute to the separate identities of Latin West and Greek East, though in 476 such distinctions were still emerging.

Culturally, the eastern empire maintained a vigorous classical education and literary tradition. Greek remained the language of administration and elite culture, while Latin continued to be used for law and diplomacy. Schools of rhetoric and philosophy flourished in Constantinople, Alexandria, and Athens, preserving the intellectual heritage of antiquity. In the west, classical education became more restricted, often confined to clerical circles. The contrast was not absolute—there were still Latin scholars in Italy—but the scale and support for classical learning diminished sharply. This uneven distribution of cultural capital would shape medieval Europe’s intellectual landscape.

The myth of 476 also obscures the fact that the Roman state did not truly disappear in the west; it mutated. Roman institutions were absorbed, reinterpreted, and repurposed by successor kingdoms. The Visigothic Code, the Lombard laws, and Frankish capitularies all drew heavily on Roman legal concepts. Roman landholding patterns persisted, and Roman municipal councils survived in some regions for centuries. The Roman past remained a source of legitimacy and a model for governance, even as political power changed hands. This selective adoption of Roman forms allowed new rulers to present themselves as heirs to imperial authority.

From a global perspective, the events of 476 look less like a unique catastrophe than part of a broader pattern of imperial transformation. Across Eurasia, large states faced pressures from climate change, disease, and shifting trade networks that forced them to adapt or collapse. The Roman empire’s western half proved less resilient than the eastern, but its components did not vanish. Instead, they formed a patchwork of polities that retained Roman elements while developing new identities. This long-term process of reconfiguration is what we now recognize as the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages.

Later historiography turned 476 into a powerful symbol, but the reality was messier and more incremental. For contemporaries, it was unclear that a definitive break had occurred. The boundaries between “Roman” and “barbarian,” between “empire” and “kingdom,” were porous and negotiated constantly. The eastern emperor remained, in theory, the sovereign of all Roman territories, and many western elites continued to look to Constantinople for recognition. The notion of a united Roman world, even if diminished, persisted as a political ideal for centuries. This ideal would shape diplomatic relations, legal claims, and imperial ambitions well into the medieval period.

The physical evidence also complicates the narrative of sudden collapse. Excavations in western cities show that many public buildings fell into disuse, but this decline often predated 476 and continued afterward at a variable pace. Some urban centers, like Ravenna, remained vibrant into the sixth century, while others, like Trier, faded earlier. In the east, cities like Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria experienced

growth and monumental building projects. The material record reinforces the argument that 476 was less a singular event than a milestone in a longer process of urban and administrative reorganization.

Coins provide another window into continuity and change. Eastern coinage maintained high standards of gold purity and consistent iconography, projecting imperial power and economic stability. In the west, coin production became irregular and varied regionally, reflecting political fragmentation. Yet even here, motifs from Roman coinage persisted, such as the image of the emperor or personifications of Victory. These echoes of Roman tradition served as visual markers of legitimacy for new rulers. The coinage tells a story of decreasing central control but enduring symbolic language.

Seals and inscriptions offer further nuance. Official seals from the east show a clear administrative hierarchy, while western seals become rarer and more diverse in form. Inscriptions in the west increasingly mention local magnates or bishops rather than imperial officials, signaling a shift in patronage and authority. In the east, inscriptions continue to celebrate imperial building projects and military victories. These sources reveal how the machinery of government evolved differently, with the east maintaining more centralized forms of public record-keeping and commemoration.

Linguistic developments also played a role in shaping post-476 identities. In the west, Latin remained the language of church and administration but increasingly mixed with vernacular speech. In the east, Greek became more dominant, though Latin persisted in legal and ceremonial contexts. This gradual linguistic divergence did not happen overnight and was more pronounced in some regions than others. It reflected the empire's evolving demographics and the practical needs of governance. Language, like law and institutions, was a domain where continuity and change intertwined.

The personal biographies of key figures around 476 illustrate the fluidity of the era. Romulus Augustulus, after his deposition, reportedly received a pension and lived quietly in Campania—a far cry from dramatic execution or exile. Odoacer styled himself as a Roman official even as he ruled Italy. Zeno in Constantinople navigated complex diplomatic waters, balancing recognition of western realities with imperial claims. These individuals acted within a shared Roman world-view, even as they helped to transform it. Their choices were pragmatic, shaped by immediate pressures rather than grand historical designs.

Modern scholars continue to debate the significance of 476. Some emphasize its symbolic importance as a turning point in European history, while others stress the long-term continuities that blurred its edges. Recent archaeology and interdisciplinary research have enriched our understanding, revealing a picture of gradual transformation rather than sudden disaster. The year remains a useful reference point, but it should not obscure the deeper currents that shaped the transition from Roman

to Byzantine and medieval worlds. Recognizing 476 as a mythic marker allows us to focus on the processes that truly mattered: institutional adaptation, cultural reconfiguration, and the endurance of Roman ideas in new forms.

Ultimately, the problem of 476 is not about determining whether Rome fell or survived, but about understanding how an ancient empire unraveled and reassembled itself across multiple spheres. The story is one of erosion and reinvention, of loss and rediscovery. The Roman state's western apparatus dissolved, but its eastern half carried forward the imperial project, reshaping it to meet new challenges. In doing so, it preserved elements of Roman civilization while creating something distinct. That complex legacy—neither a clean break nor a simple continuation—is the real subject of this book and the foundation for understanding Byzantium's long engagement with its Roman past.

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