and Byzantines also helped shape the rising Arab society.

**Early Byzantium and the Era of Justinian**

Byzantium emerged as the most powerful state in the eastern Mediterranean region, a status it maintained for many centuries. Its capital, Constantinople, straddled the narrow waterway linking the Aegean and Black Seas and separating Europe from western Asia, symbolically linking diverse peoples and traditions. The large eastern Roman Empire initially encompassed the Balkans, Greece, Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, and some early Byzantine emperors expanded the borders even further. Few emperors in Rome enjoyed the power that the Byzantine government had over its people, economy, and religious institutions.

**Justinian and Theodora**

Spurred on and advised by his powerful and ambitious wife, Theodora, Justinian was determined to defeat the German states in the west and reunite the old Roman Empire, announcing that God would help him to reconquer the lost lands. Justinian and his brilliant general, Belisarius (bel-uh-SAR-ee-uhs), reconquered a large part of the western territories, including the Vandal kingdom in North Africa. They defeated the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy in 563 after long years of fighting, but repeated battles for control of Rome left the city devastated. During the first half of the seventh century, Justinian’s successors had to turn east to fight the Sassanian Persians, and the western lands were once again lost (see Map 8.3).

**Byzantine Administration**

Justinian established a political pattern of despotism in which the Byzantine emperors were treated as near-gods and wielded absolute power over nearly every area of national life. They presided over a centralized and complex bureaucracy; spies monitored the population. Justinian had many critics, among them the great Byzantine historian Procopius, who described the emperor as “at once villainous and amenable; as people say colloquially, a moron... His nature was an unnatural mix of folly and wickedness.” But Justinian also collected all existing Roman laws into one legal code, preserving Roman laws and legal principles for later generations. Justinian’s fortunes gradually declined. In 540 the Byzantines encountered one of the most terrible epidemics in world history, often known as the plague of Justinian. The sickness, probably bubonic plague, began in Egypt and spread along the trade routes into western Asia before reaching Europe, and returned several times until 590. The misery hit remote villages as well as densely populated cities. At its height some 10,000 people per day perished. Ships were loaded with corpses, rowed out to sea, and abandoned. When Justinian died at age eighty-three, his empire was much poorer, weaker, and less populated than it had been when he took power.

**Byzantine Society, Economy, and Culture**

Despite its many political misfortunes, the Byzantine Empire survived for centuries because of its social and economic strengths. For example, the empire remained much more urban than western Europe. Constantinople grew to perhaps a million people and was described by a visitor as “a splendid city,
how stately, how fair. It would be wearisome to tell of the abundance of all good things." As in most classical societies, a huge gap separated rich and poor, but Byzantine peasants faced unique restrictions. By the fifth century, laws required peasants who had lived many years in one place to remain there. They became bound to the soil, under the control of powerful landlords. In the early years, upper-class women in the large cities enjoyed respect and influence, and some queens exercised considerable power. Women had the legal right to control their own property and the return of their dowry if their husbands divorced them. However, men enjoyed greater legal safeguards, and wife-beating was common.

Byzantine Trade and Economics

The eastern lands were wealthier than the western Roman Empire, and the Byzantine economy flourished. Merchants and bankers, including many non-Greeks, were prominent members of the urban aristocracy and benefited from Constantinople's position astride the principal trade routes between Europe and Asia. It was difficult to go by land from western Asia to Europe without passing through Constantinople, where the government placed a 10 percent tax on all goods that passed through the capital (see Map 8.4). Byzantine currency was internationally recognized and retained its value for six centuries, a remarkable achievement. But most trade with China and India had to go through Persian-controlled lands, and the Persian-Byzantine relationship alternated between uneasy peace and armed conflict. Nonetheless, Constantinople served as a hub to which ships and caravans brought many products and resources: spices, cotton, and copper from India and Southeast Asia; jewels, silk, gold, and silver from China and Central Asia; gold, ivory, and slaves from Africa; cotton and grain from Egypt; grains, wool, and tin from northwestern Europe; olive oil and silver from Spain and Italy; and timber, fur, copper, hides, and slaves from Russia and Scandinavia.

Byzantine Culture

Byzantine culture was fundamentally Hellenistic Greek, and its religious practices diverged from the western Roman tradition. The Byzantines preserved and later passed on to the Latin west (often through the Muslims) the works of Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Sophocles, and other Greeks. The Christian church in the east also became separated from its Latin counterpart, over time evolving into a different branch of Christianity, the Greek Orthodox Church. This church developed many customs and viewpoints quite foreign to the Roman church in western Europe and permeated all aspects of Byzantine life. The church, especially monasteries, gained control of considerable land and hence wealth derived from the peasants. Religious questions were avidly discussed. Emperors took the lead in proposing church reforms and calling church councils to deal with what main-

Interior of Santa Sophia Cathedral The great cathedral of Santa Sophia in Constantinople, rebuilt by Byzantine emperor Justinian, was famous for its spectacular interior.
stream Christians considered heresies. A goddess figure who represented urban prosperity in the fourth and fifth centuries was replaced by the much-beloved Christian image of the Holy Virgin Mary, which gave women moral stature. But the church also viewed women as weak and easily tempted by sin.

Over time theological disputes between the eastern and western churches grew. In general, Greek Christians came to emphasize ritual and theological disputes to a greater extent than did their Latin brethren. They also refused to accept the notion that the bishop of Rome (later known as the pope) was superior in authority to the other bishops. Conflicts over authority and doctrine contributed to the final split between the Latin and Greek churches in the eleventh century. Byzantine art and architecture, although quite original, reflected the cultural diversity of this huge empire. The fusion of some Persian and Greco-Roman influences can be seen, for example, in the great dome inspired by Persian models in the Church of Santa Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople, built under Justinian. The church was designed to symbolize inner Christian spirituality in contrast to human pride. Hence, the external appearance was modest, but the interior was richly decorated with mosaics, marble columns, tinted glass, and gold leaf.

Map 8.4
The Byzantine and Sassanian Empires

By 600 C.E., the Byzantine Empire controlled much of southern Europe and the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin, and the Sassanian Empire dominated most of the rest of western Asia, part of Turkestan, and Egypt. Various Germanic kingdoms held political sway in far western Europe, northern Europe, and northeast Africa.
Sassanian Persians and Their Culture

Sassanian Persian Revival

Both the Roman Empire and the Byzantines who replaced them in the east had to deal with a revived Persia under the Sassanian dynasty, which generated frequent conflict. The Sassanians, who took power in Persia in 224 C.E., were a high point of classical Middle Eastern history. Between 240 and 272 C.E., their rulers forged a large empire that would endure for four centuries. In the east they fought with the Kushans (KOO-shans), whose Afghanistan-based empire controlled parts of western India and Central Asia by the first century C.E. Eventually the Sassanians occupied much of Afghanistan and some of the Silk Road cities of Central Asia, but they lost these territories to the Huns in the fourth century C.E. To the west the Sassanians expanded into the Caucasus and Mesopotamia, creating chronic conflict with Rome in and around Syria. Considering themselves the successors to the Achaemenids a half millennium earlier, they also called themselves “king of kings.”

Sassanian Trade

Controlling much of the Persian Gulf, Sassanian Persia became a contact zone for international trade. A Roman writer noted: “All along the coast [of the Persian Gulf] is a throng of cities and villages, and many ships sail to and fro.” Sassanian trade links stretched east as far as India, Central Asia, and China, and south as far as the Horn of Africa. Byzantine and Sassanian coins were used as currency in the Silk Road cities. Persians produced some of the world’s finest pottery, silver plates, pearls, brocades, carpets, and glassware, exchanging these for gems, incense, perfume, and ivory.

Sassanian Religion and Culture

In contrast to the religiously tolerant Achaemenids, the Sassanians mandated a state religion, Zoroastrianism. The government imposed orthodoxy, supporting the priesthood and sometimes persecuting other religions. However, state religions tend to decay, and Zoroastrianism was no exception. The Zoroastrian establishment became corrupt and rigid, and by the fifth century the faith was losing influence and followers. Yet Zoroastrianism spawned various religions that combined this faith with others. One new religion, Manicheanism (MAN-uh-KEE-uh-niz-uhm), founded by the Persian Mani (MAH-nee) (216-277 C.E.), was a blend of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity that emphasized a continuing struggle between the forces of light and dark. Although Mani was executed for heresy, his religious dualism was later incorporated into Islam and some Christian sects.

As Zoroastrianism gradually lost influence, the state became more tolerant of diversity and turned the capital city, Jundishapur, into a cosmopolitan intellectual center. Foreign scholars migrated to the newly tolerant state, as did Jews and Christian minorities such as Nestorian Christians fleeing Byzantine repression. The Sassanians also collected scientific and literary books from many neighboring peoples, translated Greek writings, and established a renowned hospital and medical school. Sassanian Persia’s multiculturalism provided a framework that enabled later Islamic governments to rule diverse peoples and faiths. But Zoroastrianism rapidly declined, becoming only a minor faith after Islam swept through the region. In 651 the last Sassanian king was murdered, and Arab Muslim armies gained control of all Sassanian territories.

Interregional Trade, Cities, and the Arabs

Rise of Arab Culture

The ebb and flow of long-distance trade in western Asia—often influenced by the activities of the Hellenistic Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Sassanians—helped foster the rise of Arab culture. Diverse Semitic societies lived in the Arabian peninsula, a dusty region of mountains, dry plains, and harsh deserts stretching from the Jordan River and Sinai southeast to the Indian Ocean. Most Arabian peoples were pastoral nomads divided into tribes, while others lived from trade or farming. Eventually all of these groups coalesced into the Arab society.

Petra and the Nabataeans

One of the peoples out of which Arab society arose were the Nabataeans (NAB-uh-TEE-uhnz), who traded all over the Middle East by land and sea. The Nabataean writing system became the inspiration for the Arabic script. They also established a kingdom and built a major trading city, Petra (PE-truh), in today’s Jordan, astride the overland caravan routes. Built in a narrow gorge, Petra had a population of
thirty thousand at its peak. The Petra residents developed an ingenious system for collecting and storing rainwater in this arid region. Beginning in the fourth century B.C.E., Petra flourished as a crossroads for goods moving between India, Arabia, Greece, and Egypt. But in 106 B.C.E., the Romans occupied Petra, and the city began a long decline as its trade shifted north to Palmyra (pal-MY-ruh), on the Euphrates River in today’s Syria. Petra and Palmyra were two of the key trading cities that helped link east and west from their positions on the fringe of empires.

**Queen Zenobia**

Palmyra thrived until 273 C.E., when the Romans crushed a revolt led by the shrewd and ambitious Queen Septimia Zenobia (zuh-NO-bee-uh). When the Sassanians captured and killed the Roman emperor Valerian (vuh-LIR-ee-uhn) in 260 C.E., Odainat, the ruler of Palmyra and Zenobia’s husband, earned Roman gratitude by defeating a Persian force. But in 267 Odainat was assassinated and the charismatic Zenobia took power. Taking advantage of Roman wars with the Goths, she sent her army into Egypt and then occupied much of Roman Asia, including much of Anatolia. After fierce battles, the Romans reoccupied Palmyra and took Zenobia to Rome, where she died. After another revolt, the Romans destroyed Palmyra.

**Yemen**

The farming-based kingdoms that rose and fell in Yemen in southern Arabia since the days of the fabled Queen of Sheba around 1000 B.C.E. constituted another source for Arab culture. Yemen included an area of high, cool mountains and well-watered valleys. The Yemenite people were highly skilled engineers who constructed splendid cities in valleys and along mountainsides. City-states emerged, among them Saba, possibly the Sheba of the Hebrew Bible. The Yemenites traded by sea with India and East Africa, as well as across Arabia by land with the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia.

**Political Disarray and the Emergence of Islam**

In the sixth century C.E., Arabian conditions began to change. Political disarray, an Ethiopian invasion, and commercial depression began to undermine Yemeni society and power. To the north, renewed conflict between the Sassanians and Byzantines led both of them to actively seek allies in central Arabia. As a result, Arabia became a political pawn caught between Orthodox Byzantium, Zoroastrian Persia, and Coptic Ethiopia. This situation also increased the traffic over land trade routes and fostered the settlement of many Christian and Jewish merchants in desert towns like Mecca (MEK-uh). In the seventh century, all of these trends fostered the emergence of a new Arab faith, Islam, out of classical roots, and the dominance of Islamic armies over most of the Byzantine Asian territories and the Sassanian Empire.