

Byzantium

MYRNA KOSTASH

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Seven years ago, when I started the research on my new project—the life and times of a Byzantine saint—I had no idea what I was getting myself into. How could I have? What do any of us *really* know about Byzantium? I'm ahead of most of you, because I was raised in an Eastern Orthodox Church, but I wasn't really paying much attention at the time to the provenance of the saints, angels, seraphim, cherubim, prophets, patriarchs, tsars and tsarinas, adorning the interior of the church on all sides and ceiling too. They came from Byzantium, of course.

So what? Just this: I'll bet you think the Irish saved civilization. That's very Eurocentric of you, or, to be more precise, very occidento-euro-centric. The reason you think the Irish saved civilization is that you think Rome fell in 410 to the Visigoths, and so went the Empire. But did you know that in his magisterial tome, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon ends his story in 1453? Are you scratching your head? In the eastern Mediterranean world, that date is as familiar and portentous as 1066 is in ours, and for the same reason: it marked the end of one civilization and the implantation of another on the same territory. I am referring to the Fall (or Conquest, depending on your point of view) of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks, and the razing of a civilization that had lasted 1,123 years. The Byzantines—as we call them—called themselves Romans, for they were the direct and seamless heirs of the Roman Empire from the day that Emperor Constantine transferred the imperial capital to Constantinople from Rome. While “Western” civilization retreated to dank and dark monastic cells in Ireland, the Byzantines, and soon enough the Arabs in their purpose-built capital, Baghdad (750 CE), glittered and gleamed as the most powerful and desirable—indeed exquisite—cultures for miles around.

Bring on the Byzantines! Who's afraid of the East?