

Byzantine Athens

Within the Christian Orthodox Empire (330 - 1205)



In 364 the emperor Valentinian I divided the empire into two parts, the eastern half to be governed from Constantinople. The growth of the new capital was swift and phenomenal. It quickly became a large conurbation, sucking the rural population not only from eastern Thrace, but from the entire Greek world. This had the effect of diminishing the importance of all the cities within its sphere of influence, including Athens.

Towards the end of the century, the old city defences were repaired. It was none too soon. In 396 there was another barbarian incursion. Alaric the Goth advanced upon Attica and devastated the countryside. Thebes was saved only because of Alaric's haste to get to Athens. His troops occupied Piraeus preparatory to besieging the city. Then, according to a chronicler, there took place one of those 'miraculous' events which seem not to have been uncommon in this age. Alaric and his soldiers believed that they had witnessed the goddess Athena, bearing arms and pacing the battlements. Impressed by whatever it was they had seen, the barbarian offered peace to the city. He entered with just a few companions, visited the baths, was entertained at a sumptuous banquet, and received impressive gifts. He then withdrew from Attica doing no further harm. When at a safe distance from the city, however, he resumed his plundering: first sacking Megara and then crossing into the Peloponnesus, where he left a trail of devastation behind him before withdrawing to the north. Unfortunate as it always is to spoil a good story, recent archaeological evidence suggests that Alaric actually plundered the city before he departed. The Athenians once more repaired the damage as best they could.

For educated Romans, Neo-Platonic philosophy was the chief rival world-view to Christianity at that time. There was a strong revival of this pagan philosophy with the teaching of Priscus, and Plutarch, in Athens. Under their successors, Syriacus and especially Plotinus, the fame of Athens was once again to eclipse that of its rival Alexandria. Athens became the most popular place for scholars from all over the known world to complete their education.

In 435 an edict of the emperor Theodosius II closed all the pagan sanctuaries, although it was largely ignored. Indeed, travellers to Greece found that Athenians were still leaving offerings to the Fates and nymphs in various caves in the eighteenth century. Although Athens was a provincial city, several of its young women were to be raised to the imperial family. The first was the daughter of an Athenian philosopher, Athenais, who had married the emperor Theodosius in 421, whereupon she had converted to Christianity. She erected the first churches in Athens. One was inserted into the Library of Hadrian, and a shrine to the martyr-bishop Leonides erected on the banks of the Ilissos. [Read about the spread of Christianity in Athens in [Between Heaven and Earth](#).]

The death-blow to the intellectual life of the ancient world was delivered in 529 when, in an attempt to eradicate all traces of paganism, the emperor Justinian (527-65) closed the Academy, the last remaining of the philosophical schools. The function of Athens as a centre of learning, as a university city, was finally ended. From this point onwards, Athens began its long decline into an ordinary provincial country town: distinguished only by the magnificence of its ruins and the imperishable glory of its reputation. Justinian removed many columns to use in the building of Ayia Sophia in Constantinople, but he did repair the Themistoklean and Roman walls. He may also have founded the fortress monastery of Daphne on the old Sacred Road to Eleusis.

In 580, Greece was invaded by Slavic tribes, many of whom settled in the region. Once again, the walls failed to secure the lower city, and it was sacked. There is reason to believe that on this occasion the damage was very extensive.

It was probably during the 590s, when Athens was recovering from this disaster, that some of the ancient buildings still in a usable state began to be employed as churches. The ancient temple of Hephaestos, later mistakenly known as the Theseion, was dedicated to Saint George. The Parthenon was dedicated to the Virgin of Athens (Atheniotissa), and functioned as the cathedral.

Under the emperor Heraclius the government of the empire was reorganised, and the territory divided into themes, each one placed under a strategos, or general, who represented the emperor. Athens lay in the theme of Hellas, with its headquarters at Thebes, an indication of its 'fallen' state. Nevertheless, the emperor Constans II spent the winter in Athens on his way to Sicily in 662, while Theodore of Tarsus, later archbishop of Canterbury (669-690), studied in the city.

During the eighth century, the Eastern Church was rent by the Iconoclastic Controversy, a dispute about whether it is right for Christians to venerate images. The Isaurian dynasty not only banished the icons but also persecuted the monks.

The Athenians seem to have come down firmly on the side of the icon-worshippers. It was probably during this period that Mount Pendeli, riddled with above sixty known caves and hollows, acquired the name 'Mountain of Amomon (the Sinless Ones), as persecuted monks went into hiding. Carvings of angels on the rock walls of the Cave of Amomon, or Davelis, at a height of some 720 metres on the south-west face of the mountain above an ancient quarry, have been provisionally dated to this period on the basis of their style.

In 780 a second Athenian woman managed not only to marry an emperor, but for a time to rule as empress herself (780-802), when she tried to resolve the dispute in favour of the worship of icons. She is credited with the original foundation of the churches of Ay. Anargyroi in the Plaka and Pantassa in Monastiraki Square. Shortly afterwards, in 807, a third Athenian, Theophano, married a son of the emperor. She is also credited with the building of churches. [Read about the three Athenian empresses in [Athens: The City.](#)]

During the tenth century Attica was subject to sporadic attacks by Saracen pirates. Near the end of that century it is possible that for a brief time they actually captured the city and erected a mosque. In Saint John.the-Hunter was founded on Mount Hymettos.

In 996 the Bulgars plundered Attica and Boiotia. They were returning north from their campaign when they were attacked on the banks of the river Sperchios and defeated by the armies of the Byzantine emperor, Basil II. He followed up his victory by taking the war deep into Bulgar territory. In 1014 he caught the main Bulgar army in the valley of the river Strymon, and took 15,000 prisoners. He blinded all of them, except one man in every hundred, whom he left sighted to conduct his fellows home. In 1018 the defeated Bulgars accepted Byzantine rule, and emperor Basil 'the Bulgar-slayer', as he became known, travelled to Athens and celebrated his triumph in the Parthenon.

The eleventh century seems to have provided a period of renewed prosperity, perhaps as a result of increased security. The Rizokastron Wall was built to enclose an inner area of the town on the northern side of the Acropolis. This wall included the Odeion of Herodes and the Stoa of Eumenes along its length as part of its structure.

It was also a time of intensive church building. From this period date the churches of Kapnikarea, Ay. Asomati, Ay. Theodori, Ay. Nicholas Rangavas, Ay. Apostoloi in the agora, and the Omorphiekklesia in Galatsi. It is likely that most were built on the foundations of previous churches or temples, following ancient practice.

Aπ unknown patron, possibly the 'the Bulgar-Slayer' himself, cleared the ruins of

Daphne Monastery, built a new church with an enormous dome, and embellished it with wonderful mosaics. Although more than three quarters of these have been lost, enough has escaped the ravages of time to inspire visitors to ecstasies of admiration. Kaisariani Monastery and the monastery of Saint John the Forerunner at Kareas, both on the slopes of Mount Hymettos, were also founded at about this time.

In the middle years of the century the city rose against Byzantine rule, itself probably an indication of renewed self-confidence. The emperor used mercenaries under Harald Haardraade to subjugate the city. He left a runic inscription on the large stone lion at Piraeus which was to give that place its Medieval designation of 'Porto Leone'. Harald was subsequently killed in 1066 in England at the battle of Stamford Bridge. In 1147, the city was again plundered, this time by King Roger of Sicily, who took away with him some silk manufacturers.

Just before the end of this difficult period, we have an account of life in Athens from the man appointed its archbishop, Michael Akominatos. He was not happy to take up residence in Athens. He described the inhabitants as 'an uncivilised horde' whose uncouth accent, he claims, it took him three years to learn.

His complaints were many. There were the agents, praetors, census-takers, scribes, tax-collectors, customs officials and other functionaries sent out from Constantinople 'every year as numerous as the plague of frogs which the Lord sent upon Egypt.' Aegina was a nest of pirates. Eleusis was attacked by them. The praetor had 'plundered' the Parthenon. The city was a ruin: 'there is no iron-worker, no bronze-worker among us, no maker of knives.' The priests were 'an evil lot.' The congregations chattered and walked about in church. There were only ill-fed women and children in the city, naked or in rags.

The picture he paints is one of total decay and ruin, suggesting that the coming Crusaders, and Turks had little to destroy. However, it is not clear how much reliance we should place on his diatribe. He was clearly not pleased to find himself in what they considered to be a God-forsaken hole. Much of his complaint is along the lines that there were no more philosophers, and always, the contrast of present poverty with a glorious past is implicit. This was to be a common theme of later Western visitors, such exaggerated contrasts between past glories and present poverty and decay lending themselves always to painting the present in the darkest possible colours.

At this time, the bloodthirsty tyrant Leo Sgouros ruled the Argolid from Nauplia. He had invited a predecessor of Michel Akominatos to dine with him, put out his eyes and threw him from the cliff. He demanded money from the Athenians to 'protect' them from Saracen pirates. Then in 1204 Sgouros advanced upon the city

with an army, seeking the surrender of an enemy who had taken refuge there. He pillaged the lower town, but the archbishop talked him out of a siege of the Acropolis, and he went off to attack Thebes instead. It is clear that the ageing empire offered its provinces little security.