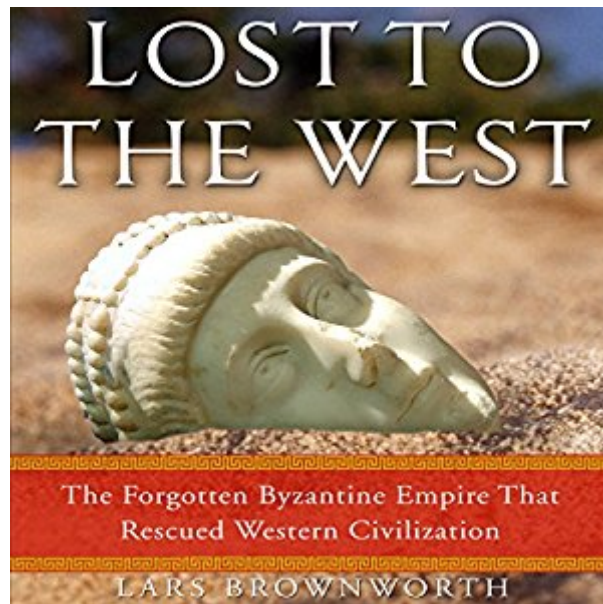


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Lost To The West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire That Rescued Western Civilization



Synopsis

In AD 476 the Roman Empire fell—or rather, its western half did. Its eastern half, which would come to be known as the Byzantine Empire, would endure and often flourish for another eleven centuries. Though its capital would move to Constantinople, its citizens referred to themselves as Roman for the entire duration of the empire's existence. Indeed, so did its neighbors, allies, and enemies: When the Turkish Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople in 1453, he took the title Caesar of Rome, placing himself in a direct line that led back to Augustus. For far too many otherwise historically savvy people today, the story of the Byzantine civilization is something of a void. Yet for more than a millennium, Byzantium reigned as the glittering seat of Christian civilization. When Europe fell into the Dark Ages, Byzantium held fast against Muslim expansion, keeping Christianity alive. When literacy all but vanished in the West, Byzantium made primary education available to both sexes. Students debated the merits of Plato and Aristotle and commonly committed the entirety of Homer's Iliad to memory. Streams of wealth flowed into Constantinople, making possible unprecedented wonders of art and architecture, from fabulous jeweled mosaics and other iconography to the great church known as the Hagia Sophia that was a vision of heaven on earth. The dome of the Great Palace stood nearly two hundred feet high and stretched over four acres, and the city's population was more than twenty times that of London's. From Constantine, who founded his eponymous city in the year 330, to Constantine XI, who valiantly fought the empire's final battle more than a thousand years later, the emperors who ruled Byzantium enacted a saga of political intrigue and conquest as astonishing as anything in recorded history. Lost to the West is replete with stories of assassination, mass mutilation and execution, sexual scheming, ruthless grasping for power, and clashing armies that soaked battlefields with the blood of slain warriors numbering in the tens of thousands. Still, it was Byzantium that preserved for us today the great gifts of the classical world. Of the 55,000 ancient Greek texts in existence today, some 40,000 were transmitted to us by Byzantine scribes. And it was the Byzantine Empire that shielded Western Europe from invasion until it was ready to take its own place at the center of the world stage. Filled with unforgettable stories of emperors, generals, and religious patriarchs, as well as fascinating glimpses into the life of the ordinary citizen, Lost to the West reveals how much we owe to this empire that was the equal of any in its achievements, appetites, and enduring legacy.

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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book comes recommended by Anthony Everitt and Tom Holland, two of the best popularizers of ancient Western history. As such, I figured it had to be pretty good. Following his successful podcast, Lars Brownworth introduces the Byzantine empire to the modern world. Often overlooked, Byzantium was the heir to Rome and a major civilization that lasted 1,000 years after the "fall of Rome" in 476. As Brownworth points out, Western civilization owes a huge debt to Byzantium, from modern legal codes to defending Western Europe against Islam. Brownworth makes this thousand-year story accessible to the modern reader.[Note: the book covers the same territory as the podcast, although the book is more detailed and worth reading if you liked the podcast.]Brownworth's *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire That Rescued Western Civilization* is literally the thousand-year history of Byzantium. It begins with Constantine and ends with the Muslim conquest in 1453. Sometimes this means the book reads too quickly, with emperors dying before the reader even gets to know them. Golden ages fade quickly into dark ages - and then back again to golden ages. However, Brownworth's goal is to introduce Byzantium to the 21st century public and, as he puts it, whet the reader's appetite for more. Doing so requires speeding past decades, or even centuries, of history, but this is often necessary to complete the story in one volume. The scope is ambitious, although I think by and large Brownworth succeeds in both providing enough detail to make Byzantium real and not getting too bogged down within a particular time period.

The Byzantine Empire - and by extension, the Roman Empire- existed for 1,123 years and 18 days. Yet most of us know little about it other than the word "byzantine" being vaguely synonymous for highly intricate, complex, murky or devious dealings. In fact, the story of the Byzantine Empire is the

telling of what we now know as Western Civilization. Beginning as the capital for the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, its primary city Constantinople became the center of a very vibrant society that preserved Greek and Roman traditions while Western Europe slipped under the control of barbarians and into what we call the Dark Ages. Lars Brownworth has written an absolutely stunning popular history of the Byzantine Empire. Remarkably, he covers in surprising detail more than a thousand years of growth, decline, war, peace, prosperity, poverty, devastation by plague, earthquakes, invading armies and internal sloth, corruption and incompetence in just over 300 pages. His writing style is relaxed and easy, yet packed with facts. There are occasions when things become confusing because he doesn't mention the years of certain events often enough and sometimes skips ahead by decades or even generations. By these are tiny criticisms to make in the context of his great achievement, making the history of the Byzantine Empire easily accessible. I consider myself to be a history buff. Though my area of concentration is primarily 19th Century Europe and the United States, I consider myself well versed in global history. But I couldn't go more than a page or two in "Lost To The West" without learning something new to me. Without Byzantine standing in the way for centuries, the onslaught of Islam might not have been stopped.

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